

FALL 1993 Vol. XVII No. 1 \$4.50

# FUSE

M A G A Z I N E

**PLUS**

**Cruising Media**

Serial Killers & Other  
"Undesirables"  
by Ian Rashid

**DQTV**

Public Access Queers  
by Gabriel Gomez

**Reviews** and a **Profile**  
of Performance Duo  
**Shawna Dempsey and**  
**Lorri Millan**

## Packaged For Export, Contents Under Pressure

*Canadian Film and Video in a  
U.S. Context*

**by Laura U. Marks**





**Geoffrey Shea**  
Pilgrim's Progress  
September 8 – October 9

**Mindy Yan Miller**  
September 15 – October 9

**Nelson Henricks**  
Conspiracy of Lies  
October 13 – November 13

**Sylvie Bélanger**  
Citer le lieu  
October 20 – November 13


**Patrice Carré**  
Marseille \* Toronto  
November 24 – December 18

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whose photo-based work was recently  
exhibited at Camera Works Gallery in  
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*Lisa Robertson is a writer who lives in  
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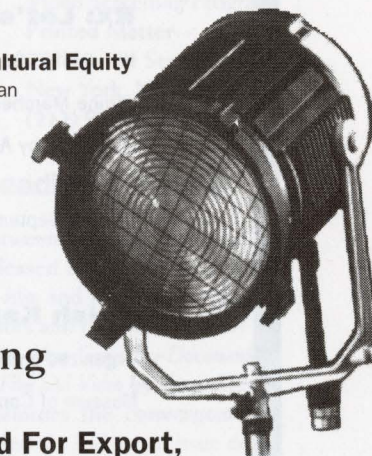
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# The Power Plant

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## Rx: Let's Play Doctor

Kim Derko, Susan Kealey,  
Janine Marchessault  
Organized by Artspeak, Vancouver

On view September 17 through October 31, 1993

## Anish Kapoor

Organized and circulated by  
Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego

## Geoffrey James: Asbestos

Sponsored by Merrill Lynch Canada Inc.

On view November 19, 1993, through  
January 2, 1994

## Upcoming Exhibitions

Will Gorriz  
Susan Schelle  
Peter Bowyer  
Michael Snow

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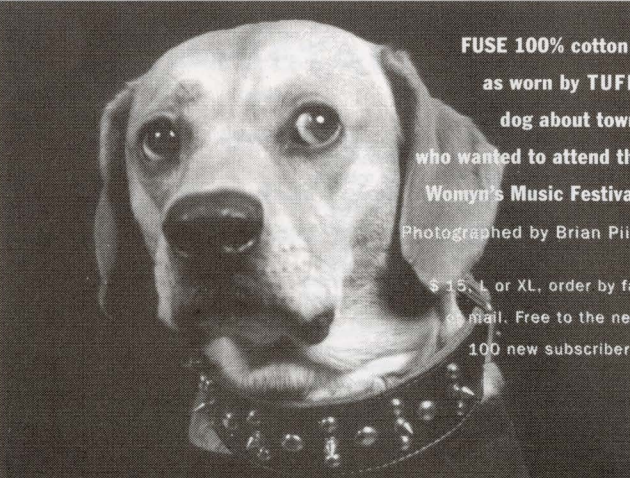
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# Film & Video News

by Susan Kealey



Lisa Steele and Kim Tomczak are congratulated by Toronto Arts Awards Executive Director Peter Caldwell. Photo © Tom Sandler, 1993.

## FRESH LOOKS

V Tape has just released a compilation of film and videos dealing with issues of race and representation. *Fresh Looks* is a three-tape package of 18 titles, highlighting the work of independent film and video producers on issues such as history, self-image, First Nations culture, systemic and internalized racism. Some of the film works included are: Helen Lee's *Sally's Beauty Spot* (1990), Jeneva Shaw's *Native Daughter* (1989) and Luis Garcia's *Under the Table* (1984). The video selections include *From Another Time Comes One/Into a New Time Becomes a Brother* by Zachary Longboy (1990), Donna James' *Maigre Dog* (1990) and Edward Lam's *Nelson is A Boy* (1985). Intended for a high school audience, the tapes are accompanied by a 56 page study manual. The series is curated by film and video critic

Cameron Bailey (who also programmes the Perspective Canada selections for Toronto's Festival of Festivals) and produced by video artist Richard Fung. For further information on *FRESH LOOKS*, please contact:

V Tape  
183 Bathurst Street  
Toronto, Ontario  
M5T 2R7  
(416) 863-9897  
fax (416) 360-0781

## Toronto Arts Awards

Toronto-based video artists Kim Tomczak and Lisa Steele are among the recipients of this year's Toronto Arts Awards. The \$5,000 award, which will be officially presented October 27, carries an added perk: the artists may commission an emerging artist to produce a commemorative work for up to \$1,000.

## INTERMEDIA

The INTERMEDIA collective is hosting its first national conference November 12-14 in Toronto. The conference will include workshops, screenings and panel discussions. Interested film and video artists of Mexican, Central American, Caribbean and Indigenous heritage living in Canada, are invited to participate. For more information contact:

INTERMEDIA  
c/o 172 Brunswick Ave.,  
Toronto, Ontario  
M5S 2M5  
Fax (416) 594-1336

## Printed Matter

Printed Matter Bookstore at DIA is currently accepting submissions for its fall screening schedule. All genres are welcome: short, experimental and documentary works. Film to

## ISSUES & EVENTS

video transfers are also welcome. Interested producers should submit a VHS dub with a return envelope to:

Video Screening Program  
Printed Matter  
77 Wooster Street  
New York, NY 10012  
(212) 925-0325

## Reading Material

Between the Lines Press has just released two books of interest to film and video producers, curators and fans alike. *Brink of Reality: New Canadian Documentary in Film and Video* by Peter Steven examines the convergence of video art and social issue documentary. Looking at the history of documentary making in Canada from the 1940s to the present, Steven identifies a new kind of production that has emerged since 1980—one that is innovative and committed to social change.

*Queer Looks* is a collection of writing by video artists, filmmakers and critics which explores the recent explosion of lesbian and gay independent media culture. Mixing interviews with critical theory, artist projects with image text pieces, *Queer Looks* reveals a plurality of strategies and aesthetics in queer media culture. Contributors include: Marusia Bocurkiw, Douglas Crimp, Sara Diamond, Sunil Gupta, B. Ruby Rich and Kobena Mercer. The anthology is edited by Martha Gever, John Greyson and Prati-bha Parmar.

Both are \$19.95, and if not available at your local bookstore can be ordered directly from BTL:

Between the Lines  
394 Euclid Ave.,  
Toronto, Ontario  
M6G 2S9





## THE LAST GENERATION Poetry and Prose CHERRIE MORAGA

Moraga explores her identity as a lesbian writer/activist in the Chicano community, weaving together a complex fabric of family, friends, lovers, catolicismo, politics, poetry, and life on the streets. Moraga presents the new ways of being human that she has discovered, often despite all odds, through the act of writing. \$14.95 pb 250 pp



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## QUEER NATURE?

UnderCurrents:  
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publication  
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views and  
ideas that  
promote  
social change  
by challenging  
traditional  
conceptions  
of nature.

UnderCurrents is looking to open-up a discussion around the connections between queer politics, environmental issues, and the politics of "nature". We welcome essays, articles, fictions, reviews, artwork (including photos), relating to questions around...

Queer landscapes...  
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Queers and the use of natural and urban environments...  
What place does race have in queer nature?...  
What sort of new fairy tales is science writing  
on the queer body?...  
Natural sex: Whose nature? Whose sex?...  
Preserving and protecting queer spaces...  
Queer representation in the heterosexual imagination...  
An epidemic of queers? or the nature of AIDS...  
and whatever else a queer mind can imagine.

Deadline for submissions is December 1, 1993

Submissions and guideline information:  
UnderCurrents, Faculty of Environmental Studies, York University,  
4700 Keele Street, North York, Ontario, M3J 1P3.  
BitNet: ES-UNDER@ORION.YORKU.CA or call Michael at (416) 658-0769

CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

## towards Cultural Equity

### The Toronto Arts Council's Forum on Cultural Equity

**Toronto**—From June 9 – 11, 1993 of this year, the Toronto Arts Council (TAC) held a forum to discuss strategies to combat one of the most pressing issues facing the arts community: equal access. The forum involved administrators from the arts councils as well as artists. Notables included acclaimed dub poet Lillian Allen and choreographer Denise Fujiwara, among others. The impetus behind this forum arose out of the momentum created by two youth art projects: *Artworks* and *FRESH LOOKS*, which took place in the summer of 1992. These events opened up new lines of communication that had not existed previously between different cultural communities, providing valuable networking to aid in the movement towards equality.

The three day forum dealt with issues of cultural equity in a straightforward and effective manner. The panels and discussion groups sought to identify the problems, actualize methods to combat the problems, implement strategies and integrate changes smoothly into the organization.

Keynote speaker Godfrey Brandt, an African British writer who is the Director of Education at the Commonwealth Institute in London, was one of the international participants who brought a new and fresh perspective to the issues discussed. Providing a "divorced view" of Canadian cultural equity problems, Brandt showed insightful similarities between our difficulties and those in Britain. He summed up his

thoughts by saying that he "recognized cultural empowerment as the key to socio-political empowerment."

Not all the ideas and views raised at the forum were subjective. Cold hard facts and figures proved to be important arguments for cultural access as well: for instance, in the '80s, while overall consumer spending grew by 14 %, cultural product expenditure grew a whopping 106 %. Overall employment in Ontario grew by 14 %, while arts and culture employment rose by 54 %. Another figure frequently brought up at the forum was two thousand—as in the year 2000—the estimated date when today's minorities will constitute major economic and voting blocs. The sentiment expressed was that unless the artists of these growing communities are allowed to express their talents and voices for their respective cultures, Canada will be in for a rocky transition.

Marrie Mumford, a Native actress and consultant to the Ministry of Culture, reiterated the sense of urgency by accusing the present "powers that be" of five hundred years of cultural neglect. She was also adamant that if artistic inspiration is continually suppressed, violent reaction would not be out of the question. She suggested that in some cases the middle men (arts councils) should be bypassed and funds given directly to the respective communities.

While rhetoric was a major component of each day's events, the forum was well or-

ganized, the speakers competent and knowledgeable, and the participants enthusiastic and insightful. Just as the resounding theme was one of cultural diversity, the same is true of the strategies needed. No one strategy will suffice. The plans of action must be as varied as the cultures. Needless to say, there must be a basic understanding and tolerance between all, and a desire to share power and resources. Starting from these premises, a true and equitable cultural diversity, which we have heard about for so many years, may be given a chance to develop.

—Vance Chapman

## Other News...

On August 7, 1993 the office of Sister Vision Press was burglarized. Computer equipment, back-up disks, records and money were stolen. For the last eight years this independent press has been publishing and supporting poetry, literature and criticism written by women of colour. The loss of the equipment and records essential to the Press's operations is both an emotional and financial setback. Despite the robbery, Sister Vision intends to continue to fulfill its publishing mandate. A benefit was held recently and The Toronto Arts Council and the collective hope that other community groups, organizations and individuals will show their support. Contact address:

Sister Vision Press  
c/o P.O. Box 217, Station E  
Toronto, Ontario  
M6H 4E2, (416) 533-2184

After a failed attempt to reopen the debate about Metro Council's decision to defund Inside Out's Film and Video Festival,

## ISSUES & EVENTS

and after media attacks on Buddies in Bad Times Theatre, Queer activists and cultural producers in Toronto have formed a direct action and lobby group. The OUT Culture Coalition has been established in order to promote visibility of cultural production by lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered artists, to access and develop existing networks and organize activist interventions.

To make contact write:

OUT Culture Coalition  
578 Dovercourt Rd.  
Toronto, Ontario, M6H 2W6

## ANNPAC, What Happened?!

Unable to elect a new vice-president at this year's Annual General Meeting, and after the resignation of the president, members of ANNPAC/RACA and the Minquon Panchayat are currently strategizing about how to restructure or reinvent the seventeen year-old artist's organization. Misunderstandings about, and resistance to, the work of the Minquon Panchayat led to a walkout by members of that group during election proceedings, leaving executive positions unfilled.

At the 1992 AGM in Moncton a caucus was formed in order to address issues of exclusion, systemic racism and the gap existing between the organization's ideological commitment to anti-racist principles and its inability to achieve the practical realization of such commitments. At this year's AGM the caucus was slated to report and make recommendations about anti-racist initiatives, as part of its two-year mandate. The turn of events at the final session of the proceedings left many frustrated, confused and alienated, and has left the future of the organization in limbo.

—KPA

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## DISMANTLING INVISIBILITY:

Asian and Pacific Islander Artists Respond to the AIDS Crisis

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# Cruising Media

## Serial Killers & Other "Undesirables"

column

SINCE MARCH, FIVE GAY MEN have been murdered in London, apparently by the same person. All the victims have been strangled during what has been described in the press as "sado-masochistic bondage sessions." The killer telephoned police and threatened to murder one homosexual every week. (*The Sun* claimed that he also called their offices but any claim made by that newspaper is doubtful at best. To understand how *The Sun* operates, imagine a more conservative, if wittier, speedier, less ethical *Toronto Sun*.) These reports were made in late June, just before European Pride Day, but as of this writing—some three weeks later—to the best of our knowledge no new murders have been announced.

The media are having a field day, needless to say. The reporting of the gay community "under siege," coupled with the quasi-discovery of the "homosexual gene" has placed gay men (since the murderer and the gene seem to be interested in boys only) on the front pages of London tabloids and broadsheets for the first time since the early days of AIDS (another

day, another "siege"). Interestingly, all three phenomena are related to the death of homosexuals: the "homosexual gene" in question has inevitably and immediately been modified in the press with the phrase "elimination of." And not one newspaper—not even a gay newspaper—has compared this hoopla with the media's negligence in reporting the daily homophobic attacks carried out on lesbians and gay men by so-called sane people.

The events have unfolded like scenes from a film. *Silence of the Lambs* being the film of choice, if you're willing to go along with the media. For most of the public, the opening scene is set on June 15, "round midnight." A press conference is called at Scotland Yard (roughly the British equivalent of the RCMP). A senior detective addresses the expectant journalists. He speaks with great embarrassment of kinky sex, ahem...sado-masochism, mutilations...the bodies of dead homosexuals...serial killer on the loose...at least five men dead...poised to strike again.... The London police follow Scotland Yard's lead and call their own press conference: "Enough

is enough," the detective chief intones, (and he really says this, honest, it said so in the papers): "Enough pain, enough anxiety, enough tragedy. Give yourself up—whatever terms, whatever you dictate, whatever time, to me or my colleagues." (Who said the British can't do cowboy films? That's Sheriff dialogue if I ever heard it.)

Hold the presses.

The front page(s) the next day and over the next few weeks featured bout after bout of hysterical and often fanciful speculation about the killer, his motive and his victims. At least three papers and several television and radio news broadcasts explicitly explained the story to their readers in terms of Thomas Harris' novel *Silence of the Lambs* and its film incarnation: "Hannibal Hunt for Serial Killer" was *The Mirror's* headline. The gist of their story was that "police are making a *Silence of the Lambs*-style bid" to trap the killer of the five gay men. Apparently the police intended to interview convicted murderers Dennis Nilson and Michael Lupo in the hope that "they will provide an insight into the fiend's twisted mind." The assumption here is

that the two men have special insight, not only into their own crimes, but into those of a stranger whose motives and murders they only know from the press and police reports. *The Silence of the Lambs* connection demonstrates a further pitfall inherent in confusing fact and fiction. "Hannibal the Cannibal," Joan Smith, author of the book *Misogynies*, wrote recently in *The Guardian*, "is a figure from Grand Guignol, an entirely unconvincing serial killer. What we know about such killers suggests they have a sense of personal inadequacy and a desperate need for control quite unlike [Hannibal] Lecter."

An even more worrying aspect of the press coverage is the facile speculations about motive. One of many myths about serial killers, according to Smith, is that they are in some way motivated by revenge: *The Daily Mail* was the first through the gate in trotting out the theory that the man "is targeting gays after contracting AIDS." This because some of the victims were HIV-positive. There has been no other evidence to reveal that the killer himself may be seropositive, but the press continues to plant the idea that people with HIV are "monsters and contagious horrors." In rebuttal, Stephen James, from the HIV support organization *Body Positive*, in a letter to *The Guardian* complaining about the media coverage, wrote, "They're not nasty, twisted people wanting to get their own back.... They're just people who sometimes have a hard time coming to terms with their disease."

*The Sun*, by contrast, quoted a criminal psychologist who suggested that the killer may be self-hating and believe he is on "a divine mission to rid the world of homosexuals." Similar motives—a "divine mission" against prostitutes and contracting venereal disease from one of them—were attributed to Peter Sutcliffe, the evocatively named "Yorkshire Ripper," who killed a number of prostitutes in the

seventies. He claimed during his defence trial that he heard voices from God telling him to murder prostitutes. In fact Sutcliffe selected prostitutes, it was later revealed, because they were the only women who were willing to accompany him to a secluded spot. The philosophy, if you like, was formulated by practicality. In this particular case, the killer may not be homosexual, which the press have failed to clearly articulate as a possibility. The readiness of some gay men to return home with a desirable stranger may have influenced the killer's choice of the victim's sexuality. The fact that some of the victims were prepared to take part in sado-masochistic activities may also have played into his hands. But the press here is intent on framing these murders as fag kills fag. The killer may indeed define himself as gay, if he chooses to define his sexuality at all, but the very possibility of even a *deranged*, murderous straight man coming on to a gay man seems too unlikely for the media to register.

The comments on gay life and lifestyles in the press have been worrying and fascinating. *The Independent*, always quite proper, included an interview with a man who gave Baroness Sinders as his name. *The Sun* did a story on a couple of uniformed motorcycle policemen who were sent in to mingle amongst the hundred and fifty thousand gay men and lesbians on Pride Day. In their aviator sun-glasses, tightly cropped haircuts, leather motorcycle jodhpurs and boots, these boys were a real hit. "It is a bit embarrassing," *The Sun* claimed one of the officers said, "we are getting rather a lot of attention. I would have worn my leggings but they make my bum hang out, you see." Pride Day itself, one of the largest gatherings in Europe, is usually ignored in the press, but this year it was mentioned in every newspaper I could get my hands on and, it seems, by all the print and

electronic media. The serial killer was referred to in every case.

*The Sunday Times* decided that "freak show" was the angle to pursue. Their headline reads: "Killed For Kicks: Five men murdered and a serial killer on the loose in London. But the problem is catching him in a world where violence is commonplace and nothing is quite as it seems." Another week, the same paper looked back on the Michael Lupo case, where a "crazed young Italian fashion consultant" strangled three men seven years ago: "The case was quickly brought to court, and the police gratefully closed the door on a murky world they neither liked nor understood. The gay world was, and remains, a mystery to the Yard's finest." *The Evening Standard* encapsulated all of our gay lives and lifestyles by decreeing that we exist in "a twilight world."

If ever a crime called for sensitive, unsensational handling, it is a serial-killer inquiry among people who have many reasons to distrust police and press. The memory of recent convictions of gay men in consensual SM practices—Operation Spanner—are bound to influence relations between gay men and detectives. Faced with recent press coverage, the chief superintendent handling the case admitted on television—rather late in the day—that detectives are handling a "very sensitive" investigation and appealed to the media to show a "responsible attitude." But it seems unlikely that the tabloid feeding frenzy will abate. And the fact that this killer speaks to some of our darkest fears—the smiling face with knife—is only part of it. These murders have offered an opportunity to promote hatred in the form of spectacle—an offer that the press cannot and does not refuse.

*Ian Rashid is a writer and independent film and video programmer living in London. He is currently developing a screenplay for BBC2's Black Screen Project.*



GABRIEL GOMEZ



# DQTV

## Public Access Queers

Democratic impulses are peculiar things in mass media institutions, and cable access television remains an oddly sturdy survivor of just such an impulse. Despite the market driven policies of the Reagan-Bush era in the US, cable access continues to offer individual community members the opportunity to produce local, low-budget television programming. As a result, there are three regularly scheduled and relatively well known American cable television shows by and about drag queens: *The Brenda and Glennnda Show* in New York, DeAundra Peak's *High Class Hall of Fame Theater* in Atlanta, and *Decoupage* with Summer Caprice in Pasadena.

Of course gender confusion or drag is a widely accepted comic conceit on commercial television. There are numerous examples. Milton Berle used a fright wig in the 1950s and '60s, while in the 1970s Flip Wilson created a popular drag persona called Ernestine. Even Tom Hanks and Peter Scarlari wore drag in the 1980s programme *Bosom Buddies*. Les Patterson's female persona, Dame Edna Everidge, currently has a talk show on commercial broadcast television that appears irregularly. But even this entertainer, who wears sunglasses larger than those worn by Elton John, is straight.

These shows all employ a knowing sexual masquerade where men in women's clothes can both play on and resist sexual connotations through the foregrounding of humour. Humour helps them resist any

serious reappraisal as potentially Queer men. Their effeminate appearances are explained by absurd situations. Heterosexual behaviour is thus reaffirmed by other means; commercial television's safely contained Queers represent anomalies against a heterosexual backdrop. Consequently, activists continue to seek greater representation in mainstream film and television products. Drag queen TV, however, has already brought Queer centred programmes to the small screen on a regular basis.

Representing a completely different impulse, the glamorous and Queer RuPaul has entered the commercial realm of music television and talk show promotion from the club world underground, with her hit single *Supermodel (You Better Work)*. Her success is tied to the same impulses that spawn cable access drag queen TV. But, sadly, democracy has nothing to do with it. The resurgence of drag queen culture, one indelibly tied to Queer desire, is a subcultural phenomenon that exists despite mainstream prohibitions against the display of explicitly Queer work.

Of the three cable access programmes mentioned above, *Decoupage*, with Summer Caprice, is the most polished. It blatantly parodies the format seen in *The Tonight Show*, *Arsenio* and *Late Night with David Letterman*. The opening of *Decoupage* has a snappy tune, canned applause, a monologue replete with poorly delivered jokes, and even a commercial break. The commercials, however, reveal something essential about the aims of cable access and its relationship to commercial television; at the same time, they reveal the awkwardness of cable access television's relation to the independent (and highly evolved) subculture of Queer camp.

Cable franchises are negotiated with municipalities, with the licence stipulating that a specific channel or channels be set aside for community use and that a portion of air time be allotted for public service announcements (PSAs). Profits from

the franchise subsidize these community messages. The PSAs shown throughout *Decoupage* represent the idealistic democratic impulse from which cable access springs. But the jarring stylistic difference between this talk show and the slickly produced PSAs disturbs the aims of this arrangement. Acting styles, dramatic conventions, even costume and make-up suffer greater scrutiny because Summer Caprice has focused so intensely on these elements of style. Consequently, the booming voice-over trembling with emotion that describes the relationship between a father and son—seen in an idealized soft focus farm setting—becomes ironically but unintentionally theatrical. Its message, urging viewers to support the United Negro College Fund, loses its dramatic impact. This occurs with many of the PSAs that *Decoupage* surrounds. The celebrity spots are particularly vulnerable. Robert DeNiro or Edgar J. Olmos become not just famous individuals doing good deeds, but instead their deadpan deliveries of messages for the public good seem strained denials of the hustling world that generates stars—a world to which Summer so blatantly aspires.

A combination of drag humour and seventies revival defines the sensibility of *Decoupage*. The messages addressed to the common good which interrupt it, however, remain uncritically attached to the assumption that there is a representable and unified community that shares similar notions of propriety—something often called multiculturalism today. The ghetto of good will which these messages come to represent actually places disparate communities within the same television space. The United Negro College Fund, The Juvenile Diabetes Association, Olmos on behalf of public school teachers and even DeNiro urging viewers to get the facts on AIDS are in themselves a result of the decoupage practiced by cable access stations accordance with the legal demands of their licensing. Commercial Cable television caters to more specific audiences. Black Entertainment TV, and numerous Spanish and Asian language stations, are common in Southern California, where *Decoupage* airs. Missing from this explicit acknowledgment of community variation,

however, is the articulation of a lesbian, gay or Queer sensibility.

Amidst *Decoupage*'s instances of blatant self-promotion, patently insincere praise and unexpected walk-on guests (Anne Magnuson and a woman streaker are two examples,) Summer Caprice articulates a Queer camp aesthetic. There are no disclaimers about Summer's sexuality to align her with the commercial examples cited earlier. Instead, the collapse of high and low culture generates the sort of aesthetic collision which has become a hallmark of camp. This collision speaks to a sordid traffic in lewd Queer taste. Summer's relationship to television is that of the Queer outsider. She exposes and infects the seemingly normal heterosexual fantasies which continue to define contemporary television's ideal of a multicultural world.

DeAundra Peek's *High Class Hall of Fame Theater* carries this parody of everyday television further, without any pretence, at technical proficiency. In a style best described as cable access grunge, a twelve-year-old DeAundra hosts her teen-age dance club TV show from the recreation room of Odum's double wide mobile home court. In between musical numbers there are Vienna sausage recipes, fan mail, and even a Miss DeAundra Peek look alike contest. In this last instance the forms of commercial television are easily recognizable as parody. Vienna wiener sausages are a motif of this imagined white trash aesthetic. Labels from Vienna sausage cans represent votes towards the winner of the Miss DeAundra Peek look-alike contest. (And don't forget, the larger the can the more votes the viewer can cast.)

Like the box top offers of children's television shows, this feigned commercial exploitation of viewer interest should inspire the teenagers in the audience to hound mom and dad to buy more and more "vianners." Of course there is no sponsorship traceable to any sausage company. Instead, the mindless marching of teenagers in tune with television's demands becomes the subject of DeAundra's Queer parody.

*The Brenda and Glennnda Show*, hosted by Glennnda Orgasm and Brenda Sexual, is more overtly political. Glennnda has described their work as guerrilla drag. They take Maybelline into the streets, where they confront homophobia and heteronor-

mativity head on with a video camera. Memorable shows include their drag appearances on the circle line boat in Manhattan, a train to Buffalo and even a trip to the Taj Mahal Casino in Atlantic City, where they were barred for wearing too much make-up. The simple premise of their work is to place drag in unusual situations. Posing a question to a random passer-by inevitably provokes a response. On the train to Buffalo their presence inspired fundamentalist Christians to besiege them with chants: "Adam and Eve not Adam and Steve." Such blatant outbursts of intolerance remind more sedate Queers of the hostility that could be provoked by the unmasking of Queer desire. It also has the effect of creating a greater awareness and tolerance among those exposed to effeminate dress.

One of last year's shows featured the then presidential hopeful, Joan Jett Blakk. Together with Glennnda, she actively promoted a Queerer America on the streets around Madison Square Gardens, where the 1992 Democratic presidential convention was taking place. Glennnda and Joan easily fell into the roles of a reporter and a "glad-handing" politician all set to take the pulse of the "common man" with their camcorder. People on the street voiced a wide variety of opinions, notably indifference, hostility, and scepticism towards electoral politics in the USA. Their spoof of the populist rhetoric of American media and political institutions inspired plenty of sympathy for their outsider status, and many street level spectators were pleased to meet the one candidate who openly expressed interest in their myriad causes. Humour and political satire remained the order of the day, despite a heavy police presence that surrounded and isolated the other aspiring representatives from any casual encounters with the people of New York.

Glennnda Orgasm, Brenda Sexual, Summer Caprice and DeAundra Peek are all drag performers who appear before their most enthusiastic audiences in galleries and clubs. From within this incestuous netherworld where taste is made, the selling of style emerges as a camp rearticulation of everyday events and elements. Glennnda recently organized an exhibition of Queer video at the Kitchen in New York as part of the Queer zine conference Spew. Zines represent an underground



Summer Caprice, make-up by Roz Music. Photo: Gretchen Knotts.

publishing movement that has been key to the resurgent spread of drag. *Thing*, a Black Queer zine explicitly tied to the articulation of a Black Queer aesthetic, publishes DeAundra's *Dixie Diary*. DeAundra is also an underground pop star represented by the record company Funtone USA, whose motto is "if it's not fun don't do it." Funtone also represents The Pop Tarts, who in turn have written music for both DeAundra and RuPaul, and are also regular attendees at Wigstock, the Labour Day extravaganza of drag in New York.

The Queer zine movement and the underground dance music club world represent areas where drag queens and Queer camp have emerged as integral elements. Drag queen television is only one manifestation of this growing aesthetic movement. Mainstream acceptance, and quite likely full scale commercial exploitation of the forms spawned by this subcultural milieu, may be the final outcome of the crossover success that has, for instance, transformed RuPaul from an underground celebrity into a full-fledged pop star. This process has its pitfalls, however.

Commercial exploitation remains a significant danger, one through which Queers could find themselves marginalized as humorous examples of the exotic. In Canada, the recent troubles of Moze





DeAundra Peek at Wigstock, New York, 1993.

Mossanen's *The Jane Show* (featuring Sky Gilbert and his drag queen alter-ego Jane) reveal the distinct characteristics of a broadcast system devoted to preserving and extending a national patrimony. A one-time undertaking produced under the auspices of the CBC for the "Sunday Arts/Entertainment and Performing Arts" series, Mossanen's project received full funding, and was slated to air on Canadian broadcast TV. Neither a purely commercial enterprise nor an American cable-access-style labour of love, in the end the CBC decided that although Jane could stay, over half her show was to be jettisoned so as not to offend its broadcast audience.

*The Jane Show* begins with a clever conceit: what happens if a Canadian family comes across a drag queen talk show while playing with the remote control one lazy Sunday afternoon? This depiction of an audience is quite funny and well acted, catching the everyday feel of irritation and intimacy that characterize family life. A brooding sense of resentment between a mother and son is inflamed, as access to the "zapper" becomes the subject of a minor domestic tussle. The right to decide what will be viewed is ultimately settled in favour of novelty and, of course, tolerance. Surprisingly, it is the mother who must be persuaded to view Jane, leaving the son's interest in this drag queen open to interpretation. While the son maintains it does not matter why or even if his interest originates in any similarity he might share with Jane, mom and the audience are

never reassured about the source of his fascination. This ambiguity was clearly as troubling to the CBC as it was to the worried mother, and thus was removed, leaving a humorous drag queen and her outrageous artist guest with his characterizations of extreme gay characters who represent a fully distinct and fascinating Queer subculture.

Sadly, the CBC, in its recent brush with drag queen TV, resorted to the censorship option in order to enact a more "suitable" way of framing drag queens. *The Jane Show*, featuring Sky Gilbert (as both himself and Jane), was reshaped to eliminate a troubling segment about the failures of liberal Canadian political mores at home. John R. Leo's article on familism in television melodrama suggests that Queers often represent discursive possibilities which can be recuperated to uphold the norms of heterosexual society even as they expand the possibilities for positive portrayals.<sup>1</sup> Leo's theories of mainstream recuperation explain the elimination of Moze Mossanen's depiction of a mother and son from *The Jane Show*. Jane, as a comic drag queen talk show host, and Sky Gilbert as her outrageous gay artist guest, could be imagined existing fully outside of a heterosexual everyday world. But a mock audience consisting of a mother and her teenage son, whose sexuality becomes an unresolved Queer possibility in a seemingly typical Canadian home, had to be removed.

In the longer version of *The Jane Show*, the conflict between mother and son

grows along with the clashing viewpoints illustrated by the talk show segments. After Jane throws off her wig in an opening spoof modelled on Mary Tyler Moore, Sky Gilbert is introduced as a successful playwright, director and performer. The two politely spar from their respective positions, with Jane playing the inane entertainer/hostess and huckster of useless beauty products, while Gilbert maintains a serious artist/activist stance. These exchanges, together with excerpts from Gilbert's plays, drive a number of issues out over the airwaves and into the Canadian home.

Two skits on defecation provoke the audience directly. Sexual desire centred around feces becomes the core element of this affront to mainstream mores. In the first of these skits, a Pasolini character explains his scatological desire to a young prospective playmate, while in the second, two tasteful looking men named Goodness and Gracious discuss the perpetrators of such distasteful sexual practices over cake. This civilized debate about defecation turns violent and ends in murder. The murder of one by the other both reverses and dramatizes their debate. It begins as Gracious asks, "What should be done with those who violate basic moral laws?" Scatological desire becomes an example of just such a violation. When Goodness responds that such people should be killed, Gracious attacks his intolerant friend with a fork. But Goodness is not dead, and he rises to murder his friend Gracious, only to be shocked and deeply troubled by the gravity of his own actions. The disgust and extreme violence of this interchange mirrors the previous depiction of Pasolini and the young man. Pasolini likewise confronts the youth with the issue of scatological desire, but in the form of a request. The young man responds, as Goodness did, by threatening to kill Pasolini for his desire. Merely broaching this subject provokes offence and varying degrees of violence. For the young man it leads to a threat. For Gracious, revulsion turns to murder. But for the mother at home, it would simply be an issue of changing the channel, were it not for that enigmatic young man, her son.

Representing a television audience became the transgressive edge of this production. Both the sequences at home and the defecation sections were eliminated.

Perhaps, like the mother character, the average Canadian was deemed tolerant (and bored) enough to accept a representation of a distinct Queer subculture as long as it remained fully self-contained, without any critique of middle class mores. When "good taste" is challenged, however, this acceptance evaporates. The two skits about defecation for sexual pleasure spark this reversal. The son blatantly points out to his mother the hypocrisy of her views. What she finds offensive and gratuitously violent is for him a sympathetic portrayal. The mother's objections quickly devolve. To her, such people exist, of course, but only at a distance, she hopes—not embodied at home (on the couch) in the person of her teenage son!

If drag queens like RuPaul succeed in mainstream commercial television, it may reflect the expanding definitions of outrageous behaviour which delimit celebrity in the service of spectacle. For *The Jane Show* however, an examination of the relationship between spectacle, offence and the liberal views of prospective viewers became the topic which ultimately could not be revealed. Jane, like RuPaul, may be carefully slotted into existing television forms (i.e. a mock talk show with a cutting edge guest,) as long as the relation of those television forms to the determination of public morality remains unchallenged. Queers may find themselves ghettoized by representations which cater either to a sense of moral outrage, or, inversely, to mere tolerance.

Drag may emerge as one strategy which can challenge the restrictions that Queers face in the medium of television or in public life in general. But that does not mean the stereotypes and misconceptions which have regulated Queer representations for decades will magically disappear. One need only compare the recent explosion of positive African American images on commercial US television with the material conditions of African Americans at large to see that such representations respond to many factors besides the needs of those allegedly portrayed.

RuPaul herself initially appeared on African American television programmes. Her music video has been shown regularly on BET (Black Entertainment Television) and she has also been interviewed on one of its music programmes. The BOX, a pay per view station regarded as an indicator



Joan Jett Black announcing her candidacy for the presidential election. Chicago. Photo: Genyphyr Novak, © 1992.

of emerging trends, also had her song in high rotation. Her first major network appearance was on *The Arsenio Hall Show* where she brought the aims of Queer politics, style, and humour—elements that characterize DQTV—to commercial mainstream television. She was overtly political, characterizing the 1980s as colourless, and heralding a new era in which the pendulum is "gonna come crashing back to the left." RuPaul combines fantasy, entertainment and a sure sense of herself. The politics of drag performance based on humour, strength and a Queer support network may well succeed where the politics of multiculturalism have failed for Queer representation.

Access to electronic media can foster a sense of identity which can in turn stimulate political action. Queers know that RuPaul is indeed powerful, and for them her appearances in the straight world of commercial television reiterate that possibility. Her presence alone, however, cannot overturn bigotry and ignorance there. But, as she herself noted, it may help those who need it. All the TV drag queen styles examined here, from Summer Caprice with her performance art sensibility, to DeAundra's strange club land demeanour, from the gritty streetside manner of Glenda and Brenda to (even) the carefully edited Jane, create forms of expression where the overtly political and the cultural coalesce in a Queer identity that is visible, open, and powerful.



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#### NOTES

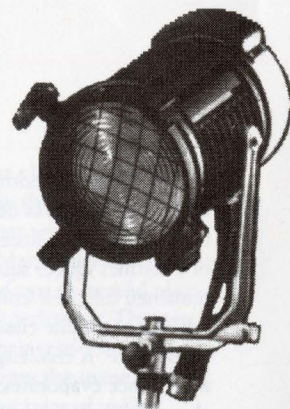
<sup>1</sup> Leo, John R., "The Familism of Man in American Television Melodrama," *Displacing Homophobia: Gay Male Perspectives in Literature and Culture*, eds. Ronald R. Butters, John M. Clum, and Michael Moon (London: Duke University Press, 1989), pp. 31–51.

<sup>2</sup> hooks, bell, *Black Looks: race and representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992).





LAURA U. MARKS



# Packaged For Export, Contents Under Pressure

## Canadian Film and Video in a U.S. context



"IT LOOKS THE SAME, THERE'S JUST SOMETHING A LITTLE BIT...OFF," is what Americans say when visiting English-speaking Canada. What happens, I want to ask, when a Canadian image is presented in an American context? How do Canadian independent filmmakers cope with the representation of Canadian national identity? And how can media construct or demolish national identity? I want to suggest that when viewing artifacts of English-speaking Canada involves this little-bit-offness, it might be considered as an agent of political intervention. Aware that their work will be viewed in the culturally colonizing context of American exhibition, distribution and other support structures, Canadian media workers sometimes present images of Canada that both champion and dispute the notion of Canadian identity. By playing both sides of the coin, these artists are thus able to simultaneously assert and redefine national and local identities. At the same time, Canadian film/videomakers cross to and from the U.S. for recognition and support, and in these border crossings can also be seen to enact another aspect of their critical practice.

I want to look both at how Canadian independent filmmaking is perceived in the U.S. and how independent media represent Canada, with an eye to how these disguised and diffident packages of Canadian culture may become volatile in their reception in the U.S. This exploration is necessarily somewhat personal, because as a dual citizen of the U.S. and Canada I both identify with and fetishize Canadian nationality, and find that my insider-outsider relationship to Canada has informed an ongoing obsession with the breakdown of national borders and cultural boundaries.

The notion of Canadian national identity gets part of its resilience from the fact that "Canada" is a term that does not stagger under the burden of signification that "America" does, especially within the popular culture that permeates both countries. "Canada" has a more expansive quality, it is more open to interpretation and redefinition. Thus it is easier, in a way, for Canadian filmmakers to make a mark on, or a dent in, the national identity. In addition, this uneasiness with the notion of uniform national identity makes Canadians good at interrogating U.S. national identity: better than Americans are at doing it themselves.

Rather than attempt a survey, I've drawn selectively on work from English-speaking Canada, drawing on a series of interviews with Canadian film/videomakers who have had instructive experiences on both sides of the border: Helen Lee, John Greyson, Ardele Lister and Sara Diamond. It will not focus on work that represents Canada in terms of what (to outsiders as well as Canadians) is exotic about it, but at work that might "pass" as American. Canadian philosopher Robert Schwartzwald

writes, "as in the United States, the temptation has been to advance a national identity through the symbols of communities and peoples marginalized along the way, especially the continent's original peoples."<sup>1</sup> This temptation to specularize Canada in terms of its visibly exotic people must be avoided, largely because what this does is allow white power centres to continue to function, invisibly. Within Canada this invisibility functions to disguise power; but outside Canada it can work to subvert other invisible powers, Trojan Horse style. Canadian film, seen in the United States, can trouble the viewer's consciousness of American cultural and political centrality.

*White Dawn*, a short video by Kim Tomczak and Lisa Steele, speculates about how this little-bit-offness would look if the relations of cultural imperialism were reversed. It asks, what if all the American movies, TV shows, books and magazines got switched overnight for something that looked almost the same...but not quite? "It was like a dream I couldn't wake up from," says the narrator who has awakened in this doppelganger universe. "Everything was just...off." The narrator (a male figure with a female voice-over) realizes that s/he is in Canada. As books by Farley Mowat, Margaret Atwood and Robertson Davies wave across the screen, s/he complains: "These people are so dominating. They've made things, I don't know, so *familiar*. How come I know so much about Newfoundland, and Toronto?" Even with "American content" rules and stiff import taxes, dismally tiny proportions of "American" music, books, magazines and music make it onto local markets. Through this simple reversal, the tape suggests a way of turning the tables on U.S. cultural hegemony in order to supplant what is well known to U.S. viewers with something just a little bit different, and watch the productive confusion that results.

I got the run-around trying to rent *White Dawn* for a video series in Rochester, N.Y. recently because its U.S. distributor had stopped carrying it. This little problem is typical of the way Canadian independent media is viewed, or more accurately not viewed, in the United States. Canadian access to exhibition and distribution in the U.S. is abysmal, and this is perpetuated by patronizing American attitudes toward Canadian independents. Americans in the independent media scene tend to believe Canadian filmmakers are overfunded. A rare article on Canadian filmmaking in *American Film* in 1990, "They Always Get Their Film," conveys this and other misconceptions in its title-page spread that reads: "The Canadian government has sired [sic] a national cinema, but can a film industry survive when every taxpayer is a producer?"<sup>2</sup> The title, with its outlaw, Wild West reference, spreads over a production still in which samurai on horseback ride into a Rocky Mountains panorama: the connotations being that Canada is simultaneously vast wilderness, multicultural paradise and a place where the most outlandish funding proposals are nurtured to fruition.

While Winikoff's article supports the idea that government funding allows Canadian film to be more artful and complex than Hollywood product, it falls back on the notion that government funding impedes filmmakers from world-class achievement. "While a handful of those with international clout, like Norman Jewison and David Cronenberg, can make truly independent films, the vast majority—including those who've already taken home some major awards—are subsidized by the government." Winikoff's assumption is that commercial success is the result of individuals' ability to rise to the top. He ignores the fact that the industry is structured to ensure that virtually only Hollywood films make it into distribution and that independent production is seen as a training ground for Hollywood talent. American individualism is the lens through which this writer sees Canadian filmmakers as "making it" or not. At the same time, contradictorily, he seems to recognize that the (mythical) self-made filmmaker of the U.S. model somehow fails to achieve the aesthetically and intellectually rigorous standard upheld by the subsidized Canadians.

<sup>1</sup> Robert Schwartzwald, "an/other Canada. another Canada?, other Canadas," *The Massachusetts Review*, Spring-Summer 1990, p. 12.

<sup>2</sup> Kenneth Winikoff, "They Always Get Their Film," *American Film*, July 1990, pp. 26-30, 44-45.





this opportunity is lacking for Canadians. But the exposure given to Canadian film by an article such as Winikoff's (who is a "Bronx-born...sometime playwright now living in Vancouver") perpetuates the notion that a free-market competition exists for filmmakers irrespective of national base.

Meanwhile, the advertising surrounding Winikoff's article in *American Film* is for Canadian film-production unions—the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE), the Association of Canadian Film Craftspeople, and the British Columbia Council of Film Unions. Americans reading this article most likely have their eyes on Canada as a site for their own productions. Funnily enough, the background still of samurai riding into the sunset is from a film by Japanese director Haruki Kadokawa—evidence that the attraction to Canada for readers of this magazine may be more to Canada as raw material than to Canada as cultural site or cultural innovator. A sidebar article, "Luring Cameras to Kamloops," describes the joys of filming in B.C., Alberta (for westerns), and Toronto (for that urban look, at a fraction of the price). I don't want to make too much of this, but this combination of articles for American readers perpetuates the notions that Canadian film production is nurtured into somnolence, and that Canadian filmmaking is only interesting once it stands free of the crutch of government funding, but that Canada is pristine ground for American exploration! The subversive power of slight differences doesn't seem to amount to much when American movies shot in Canada go to pains to efface the difference. Filmmaker John Greyson jokes that whenever you see garbage on the street in Toronto, you know it's a "New York" film shoot.

What, then, is a more constructive notion of Canadian film that might be appropriate for export? A number of theorists and artists have argued that Canadian culture tends to be postmodern by virtue of its formation of a national identity in terms of its sense of otherness. In his 1985 manifesto, "The Cinema We Need," Bruce Elder argues that Canadian cinema is predisposed to be a postmodernist cinema.<sup>3</sup> According to Elder, Canadian culture and philosophy never abandoned a premodern epistemology, one in which there persisted an intimate connection between humans and nature, rather than a radical separation. The epistemology kept us concerned with content, with narrative, with tangible links to the world around us. His thesis seems to be drawn from the sturdy old observation that Canadians have had to carve out a living in the inhospitable wilderness and hence have an intimacy with and respect for nature. So when the postmodern era rolled around, Canadian culture was in a position to embrace the otherness at its core because it never really left it.<sup>4</sup>

Elder's argument places Canadian (formalist, experimental) cinema nicely in the position of vanguard. However, he can only do this by perpetuating the frozen-North

image that has ceased to define Canada, except for the most uninformed outsiders. While conceptually, according to this argument, Canada nicely occupies the position of postmodern subject, it is only by virtue of being the "other" of a movement incubated somewhere else—Paris and L.A., not Vancouver, Toronto or Montreal. Elder's is a form of provincial postmodernism which does not accept that Canadians produce postmodernism, but only that Canada is postmodern. If we agree with Elder's argument, postmodernism would seem to inhere in Canadian culture not by choice but naturally, to bleed from our veins like maple sap. Geoff Pevere, an upstart on the Canadian film criticism scene when he joined the dialogue around Elder's essay, argued as much when he criticized Elder's imperious neglect of the role of the viewer in constructing the political efficacy of a film. Elder's manifesto, Pevere rails in proper in-your-face cross-generational fashion, promulgates "a view that seeks to establish a hierarchy of knowledge and privilege that exploits mystification as a necessary means of maintaining an imbalance of power between the exalted few that produce and comprehend art and the greater masses who do not. And, while we're at it, just what the fuck is 'art' anyway?"<sup>5</sup>

I would not go so far as Pevere in rejecting Elder's arguments for their aesthetic absolutism. I would, however, argue that Canadian cultures cannot be understood as postmodern without seeing the degree to which they are also postcolonial. Elder was right that the most successful works of independent Canadian cinema today are predisposed to a certain decentring quality. But this is not an effect of having to huddle against the raging north winds, at least not primarily. Rather, its cause is Canada's volatility in terms of cultural composition. The inherent otherness that Elder and others describe as making Canadian national identity more volatile, more prone to redefinition, is directly connected to the flow of new populations and subsequent processes of (second- and third-generation) hybridization. The "constants" of Canadian identity are as insubstantial as the cups of milky tea that are a postcolonial convention. Nevertheless, this latter motif impressed me profoundly as a adolescent immigrant from the States, discovering that her schoolmates, whose parents spoke Bengali, Chinese, Polish, or with a thick Scottish or Jamaican accent, all shared the custom of Red Rose and digestive biscuits in our identical Mississauga tract homes. It took me a while to realize that these lingering marks of empire were the constants of our shared culture, and that cultural imperialism indeed continued to play itself out in some of my friends' lives in decidedly less cozy ways.

Ultimately Pevere does fish the baby of Canadian subjectivity out of the bath water of formalist obfuscation, in a 1987 article in the U.S. magazine *The Independent*. Here Pevere's argument is reminiscent of Elder's emphasis on the Canadian as postmodern, focusing on the quality of alienation in Canadian independent cinema.<sup>6</sup> This quality showed up in many works such as Atom Egoyan's *Next of Kin* (1984) and *Family Viewing* (1987), Patricia Gruben's *Low Visibility* (1984) and Bachar Chbib's *Evixion* (1987). "They demonstrate a critical awareness of how this exposure to the cultural products of an alien culture must necessarily lead to the chronic alienation from their own cultural context," Pevere

<sup>5</sup> Geoff Pevere, "The Rites (and Wrongs) of the Elder or The Cinema We Got: The Critics We Need," in *Documents in Canadian Film*, p. 328.

<sup>6</sup> Geoff Pevere, "An Outsider's Aesthetic: Contemporary Independent Film in Canada," *The Independent*, June 1987, pp. 13–18.

<sup>3</sup> Bruce Elder, "The Cinema We Need," *The Canadian Forum*, February 1985; reprint, *Documents in Canadian Film*, ed. Douglas Fetherling, (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1988), pp. 260–71.

<sup>4</sup> This thesis, so popular among theorists of Canadian identity, sounds awfully similar to psychoanalytic theories of female identity. Girl children, because they identify with their mother, are never able to separate completely and form a coherent identity. Canada, according to such an argument, cannot enter modern culture because it cleaves to the Nature at the foundation of its identity.





<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

Top still from *Behold the Promised Land*, Ardele Lister (dir.), video, USA, 1991.

Below Patrick Tierney (l) and Berge Fazlian (r) in *Next of Kin*, Atom Egoyan (dir.), film, 1984.



writes. "In other words, what this generation has achieved, and what simultaneously binds them to, and distinguishes them from, their predecessors, is a level of active autocriticism of their inherited condition of cultural disaffection."<sup>7</sup>

This question of disaffection which is seen by Pevere and others as defining Canadian cultural practice, provides a structure for Ardele Lister's *See Under Canada Nationalism*, a tape that subtly deals with the notion that Canada is structured around a lack. I have a suspicion that *See Under* will always be seen as a work-in-progress, since its object, getting Canadians to define their nation, remains quite elusive. The tape is structured around a list of "Canadian" qualities that Lister uses to survey a variety of opinions and observations. Lister's interviewees are incapable of the windy generalizations of their American counterparts in her tape *Behold the Promised Land*. Instead, their terms are low-key and relative: "nice," "friendly," "not overly aggressive," "not as harsh as the U.S." Found footage is used in a manner which is similarly self-deprecating; the

voice-over accompanying a shot of bathers splashing in Georgian Bay asserts: "Canada was covered in ice for 20,000 years but has warmed up almost completely." The film, a '60s promotional film called *Helicopter Canada*, begins with the sound of yodeling. Yodeling? It is as though Canada can only image itself by association with other national traditions: and this in a film promoting tourism in Canada! Lister muses in the tape that "maybe Canada is one of the first post-modern countries. There's no metanarrative, or as Yeats said, the centre will not hold." Ironically enough, despite the difficult time her interviewees have with making generalizations about Canada, they come up with quite concrete reasons to

like their country, reasons such as gun control and socialized medicine.

Pevere's article captures a quality predominant in film works of the past decade. However, I would argue that the preoccupations of Canadian independent cinema, and the political agendas they support, have already shifted—as have the theoretical concerns with semiotics, psychoanalysis and feminism in film and media studies that Pevere rightly points out were ascendant "when this bunch [of filmmakers] would've been hitting the books." Now, it seems, as a result of work done in the last decade, the hot issues concern less a generalized alienation than an affirmation of local specificity. A useful maxim of '80s theory which still remains strong suggests that one cannot speak for others but may only represent one's own experience with any intimate authority. Many contemporary Canadian independent films define Canada precisely in terms of what it

is not, focusing on regional or ethnic identity or local politics rather than by appealing to a generalized alienation. Most Canadian film/videomakers I have spoken to identify with a particular community before they identify their work as Canadian. Being part of a feminist, or Asian, or rural, or Queer or other specific experience gives one an identity more pressing than the abstractions of nationality. In many cases, this identity informs membership in a transnational community that threatens the coherence of national identity. This enables their work to dispute the identities imposed at national and international levels. What I want to argue is that Canada is more flexible with regard to such differences, indeed is even constituted by them. Canadian films, when they deal with national identity at all, *perform* it: there's a self-consciousness of the distance between the national symbols and one's personal and community experience. This is all to the good for the image of Canadian filmmaking, I believe, to the degree that the national image cannot be upheld as a pedagogy, a grand narrative, but is viable as performance.

The former is "the process of identity constituted by historical sedimentation"; the latter is "the loss of identity in the signifying process of cultural identification."<sup>8</sup> A pedagogy of national identity insists in large terms, from above, on the existence of things that pull a nation together—flag, national anthem, common history. The other register in which national identity is (de)constructed is the performative level, in which individuals' daily actions elaborate, undermine, and redefine the grand narratives put in place by the pedagogical. The performative, dependent upon the "performances" of millions of individual actors, appears to be the means by which a nation's identity can get derailed or redirected. These two registers of national identity, top-down and bottom-up, work together like a scarf that's being knitted from one end and unraveled from the other. In one direction, the national identity is put in place by national holidays like Thanksgiving; in the other, it is reconstructed by the actual stuff people choose to put on their table.

Using Homi K. Bhabha's categories, I think it is possible to look at nations as differentially defined more in terms of the pedagogical or the performative. A nation with a well-defined national identity, such as the United States, is constantly involved in pedagogy, containing the disunity of its people in the unity of grand national narratives. By contrast, I would argue that the performative level of narrating national identity is more characteristic of Canadian self-definition, in which the nation as a whole is ill-defined precisely to the degree that groups within it are developing their own identities. Pedagogy situates the people of a nation as objects, receivers; the performative constitutes them more as subjects intervening in the definition of a nation. In short, the difference that makes Canada is in the details.

Relatedly, Schwartzwald refers to the notion of becoming as a seductive way to characterize Canadian national identity.<sup>9</sup> The centre (of power, of cultural identity) is continually dissolved by the margins, by what it is becoming. And to the degree that in Canada the centre has never been fixed, except in terms of *what* it is becoming, national identity is fluid and volatile indeed. But it must be asked how much this volatility is the main thing going on, and how much it is a convenient screen for more stable powers. Transnational powers, for example.

Schwartzwald, a Canadian living and teaching in the States, suggests that two things characterize Canadian culture: simple envy, and the concomitant notion of "purity of origins," namely that Canadians, by virtue of being at the periphery of power of the United States, are innocent and free of evil (an attitude that Lister's interviewees seem to support). Both define Canadian culture in terms of a cycle of dependency. Schwartzwald argues that the way to get out of this relation is "neither by copying the discourses of others, nor by revaluing what is said but devalued within a discourse, but by excavating that which is repressed by relations of domi-

<sup>8</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, "DissemiNation," in *Salman Rushdie and the Third World: Myths of the Nation*, ed. Timothy Brennan (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987), p. 304.

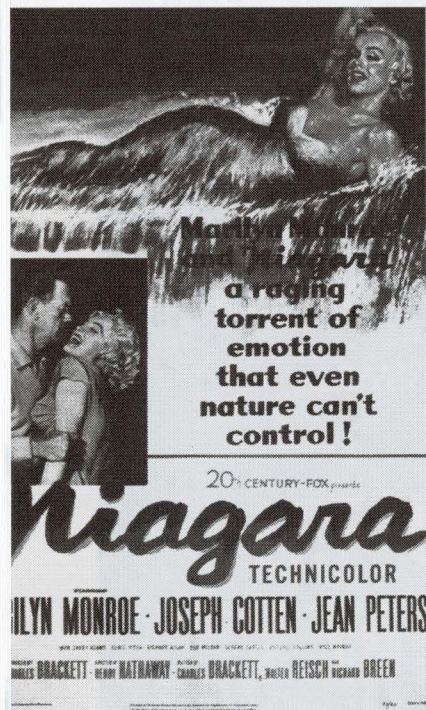
<sup>9</sup> Schwartzwald, p. 24.



<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 37.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 42.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Dorland, "The Shadow of Canadian Cinema: Bruce Elder's Immodest Proposal," in *Documents in Canadian Film*, p. 322.



nance."<sup>10</sup> In order to justify distinguishing ourselves from the homogeneous, apparently universal condition that the United States has created for itself (the hegemonic idea that the U.S. occupies such a universal position that it is not necessary to point to it), we have to justify our attachment to specific traditions. This is not "a simple rejection of universality...rather, it takes the form of an acceptance of the 'other' precisely in his difference, a defence of plural traditions, ethnicities and communities, that has been called a 'philosophical federalism.'"<sup>11</sup> The point is that particularity is what defines Canada, not in a contingent but in an absolute way.

Interestingly, the notion of Canadian identity as becoming which Schwartzwald pursues shows up in one of the most generous and productive readings of Elder's manifesto. Michael Dorland, who edited some of the Elder exchange in *Cinema Canada*, contrasts the angst about the disappearing subject fashionable in American cinema with "Canadian art [which] (as I read Elder) is a manifestation of the appearing subject-object as the dialectic between person, place and mind. His is a realism in which Canada is not a perpetual becoming or vanishing, but an integer."<sup>12</sup> Canadian identity understood as a ratio between disintegrating and coming into existence is an apt metaphor for the process of national self-creation. It offers a way for individual actions to be seen as part of the construction of nation. While it is easy to flirt with disintegration when you know you're at the stable centre—as is the tendency with American cultural production—when disappearance is a real risk, the acts by which identity is constructed take on more significance. The notion of Canada as becoming however avoids some of the negative construction of Canada as lacking and decentred that these approaches loosely associated with postmodernism tend to share. Instead it ties into the much more productive idea of national identity as performed, an idea outlined above.

In addition to this difference between Canadian and American concepts of post-modern identity, there are somewhat more tangible reasons for Canadian disinterest in the wholesale disappearance of the subject, which came up in a conversation I had with videomaker Sara Diamond. Diamond points out (in an argument similar to Elder's) that the Baudrillardian influence still prevalent among U.S. video artists never took off in Canadian work. Baudrillard seems to have filled a gap for artists and theorists who want to critique the power of the image but have no faith in their ability to influence change. Hence the plethora, especially in the 1980s, of work by U.S. artists dealing with media appropriation and the illusory quality of representation. "Canadians' relation to media culture is different," says Diamond. "There have been public TV and public radio here for longer than in the U.S. We've been able to use and to trust the image a little more. Maybe Canadians have been less willing to buy into the notion that media constructs reality totally and insisted on placing media in an instrumental relationship to other forms of resistance."

In contrast, within Canada, Marxist traditions have continued to carry weight among artists. Because Marxist approaches have always had some currency in this country, while they were killed off for some time in the U.S., Canadian media work has been able to evolve formally while maintaining an interest in social content. As well, because media representation has not been so utterly bound up with consumer culture as it has in the U.S. there seems to be less despair that the image is irrevocably corrupted. The more integral relation of art to social content in Canadian video work, Diamond suggests, has to do both with intellectual traditions and with the material circumstances of media production in Canada. Consequently, there is a more integral relation of art to social content in Canadian video work.

Diamond's argument points to how it may be possible for artists such as those I describe here to continue to work politically while also interrogating representation, rather than having to choose one of the divergent paths of art or activism that seem

to characterize much independent video work in the States. "The division of labour between documentary, community-based work, and video art is very marked in the U.S. whereas they have never been completely separate in Canada.... People who did work like this in the States would have been marginalized—such as Martha Rosler, whose work would be typical here." Only recently, Diamond notes, have U.S. artists begun to collapse those categories, in work on AIDS and postcolonial issues. Diamond's comments suggest that the hot new American video work has an unacknowledged debt to ongoing explorations by Canadians.

Helen Lee is a second-generation Korean Canadian who grew up in Toronto, studied film at New York University, and now, like other Canadian independents, has been moving back and forth between the two countries in order to do her work. Her 1992 film, *My Niagara*, both responds to American constructions of Canada and shows how "Canadian" identity is composed of specific local, regional, and ethnic identities and the conflicts among them. The film Lee's responds to is Hitchcock's *Niagara* (1953). In that film Marilyn Monroe plays one of several characters who, like many other Americans, makes it only as far into Canada as the title suggests; that is, only as far as the border city of Niagara Falls. Referencing and parodying *Niagara*, Lee's film fills the earlier film's bland, uniform image of Canada with a conflicted and multiple identity.<sup>13</sup> *My Niagara* deals with the internal struggles of Asian communities in Canada. It interrogates Japanese racism toward Koreans, while also addressing the struggle to locate and maintain Japanese identity, never as a stable thing but always as a negotiation across borders. The film's emotional impact also has to do with cultural displacement; it is partly about the main character's struggle to figure out who she is when the person who embodied her cultural identity, namely her Japanese mother, is gone.

Lee says, "*My Niagara* is definitely set in Toronto for people who know Toronto. But I wanted it to be able to be read both ways, the character to be either Japanese Canadian or Japanese American. It's also a matter of political self-definition, of what it means to be Asian American or Asian Canadian.... It's a matter of dissolving boundaries, about collapsing categories, as much as about self definition." Lee uses Asianness as a category that crosses national boundaries, and her film's characters performatively establish the Canadian location as a permeable space.

Lister's *See Under Canada Nationalism* and its companion tape on American identity, *Behold the Promised Land* (1991) embody the difference between the broad-brushed rhetoric of American nationalism and the tentative demarcations of Canadianness. In *Behold the Promised Land*, Americans interviewed at Fourth of July picnics unselfconsciously mouth slogans about their national identity, such as the Brooklyn girl who defines the Fourth of July as "about independence. (Lister asks off-camera, 'Independence from what?') Benjamin Franklin and the government got together and signed a peace treaty ('With who?') with Abraham Lincoln...and that meant the slaves were free." Other Independence Day celebrants denounce welfare, extol Americans' freedom to work their way to the top, talk about defending their country, and otherwise have no trouble occupying the space created by nationalist rhetoric. Lister makes this alliance clear with footage culled from '50s educational films, which, for



Still from *My Niagara*, Helen Lee (dir.), film, 1992.

<sup>13</sup> The film may also be read as a collegial reference to Brenda Longfellow's *Our Marilyn* (1987) an experimental work about the alternative representation of femininity offered by Canadian long-distance swimmer Marilyn Bell.



Top still from *The Making of Monsters*, John Greyson (dir.), film, 1991. David Gardner (left) portrays Georg Lukacs as he fires Bertolt Brecht (the fish) while actor Joe (Lee MacDougall—far right) looks on. Photo: Guntar Kravis.

Below still from *Urinal*, John Greyson (dir.), film, 1989. Dorian Gray (Lance Eng) checks out his portrait.



<sup>14</sup> Bhabha, p. 305.

all their Cold War hyperbole, reflect an attitude that is still alive and well among her contemporary interviewees.

These two tapes' different modes of expression correspond neatly to Bhabha's two ways of constructing national identity: the pedagogical and the performative. In Bhabha's pedagogy-performance model, can the little performances that constitute Canada insinuate themselves into the massive national fiction that constitutes the United States? And if such a subversion is possible, what politics does it serve?

Bhabha argues that the difference at the level of performance might, instead of being assimilated and neutralized, disrupt the commonsense nature of the performative. Lister's "Freedom from what?" for example, is a performative response that undermines the national pedagogy. That "little bit off" quality of Canadian images, seen from a U.S. perspective, is the detail that makes it possible to question the whole. The works I have been discussing perform the subversion of American identity by insinuating their differences into the national pedagogy of the U.S. Greyson's work, for example, which I will discuss in more detail below, is barely noticeable as Canadian, yet it is chock-full of references to specific locations in Toronto and Orillia, figures in Canadian media history from Claude Jutra to Barbara Frum, and specific Canadian products (like the white-chocolate mousse cake from Dufflet's Bakery on Queen Street in Toronto, featured in *The Making of Monsters*).

Given the superficial similarity between English-speaking Canadian media and U.S. media, it seems possible that a Canadian performative, as it "intervenes or insinuates itself in-the-place-of,"<sup>14</sup> could disrupt the American pedagogy. Within Canada, needless to say, middle-class urban dwellers of Anglo Saxon extraction occupy the power centre. But placed next to the more absolutely powerful—namely, the same sort of people in urban centres in the States—Canada's bland powerful can trouble that absoluteness.

Many Canadian filmmakers are not as sanguine as I am about the subversive potential of Canadian identity in American contexts. Greyson, for example, says that "Americans have an amazing tendency to assimilate Canadian work to American

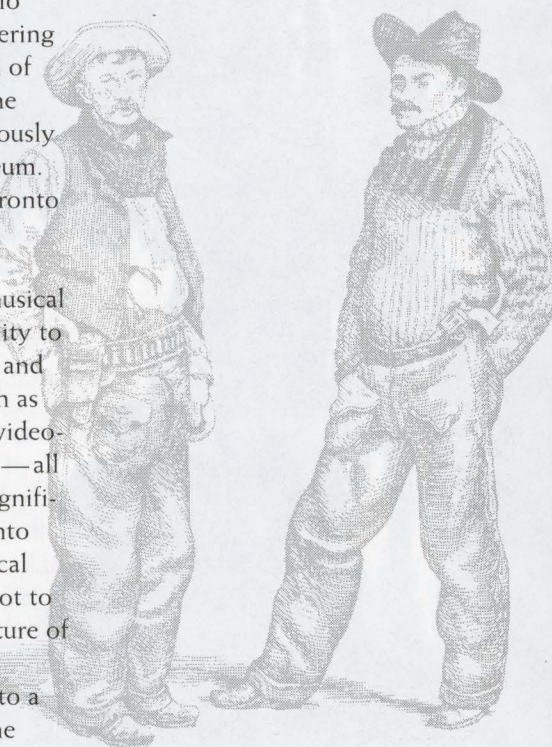
experience. It's perceived as out-of-state work; I'd say we're seen as Midwestern. Canada doesn't exist as a national entity to the U.S. It's perceived as regionally other,

not nationally other." Yet Greyson's own work, by placing the localities and events of southern Ontario at the centre as though they were universal, does seem to unsettle the complacency of U.S. work that assumes to speak from the centre. Throughout his career Greyson's films have been aggressively local. They simply assume that viewers will care about bathroom raids in Orillia (*Urinal*), docudramas on CBC (*The Making of Monsters*), or exhibits at the "Toronto Natural History Museum" (*Zero Patience*). Greyson talks about "the authority of the local," the ability of small towns and obscure events to take on a mythic quality through their representation in literature or film. Specific, possibly obscure references have the ability to destabilize the fictive centre that New York independent filmmakers, no less than Hollywood, promote.


Greyson's new feature film, *Zero Patience* (1993) will probably be the film that propels Greyson to international acclaim, and so it is interesting to look at how the local, mostly Toronto, references that structure *Zero Patience*, operate without explanation or apology. The Canadian elements of the film are in part necessary, such as the fact the so-called Patient Zero was a French Canadian, and in part gratuitous, such as the ubiquitous references to the Canadian synchronized swimming team on the radio news. Greyson plays knowingly with the conjunction of sexual and cultural othering in the character of Patient Zero: and defaming the Quebecois is one motivation of the Toronto bureaucrats who take an interest in him. Its principal character is the nineteenth century Orientalist traveller and scholar Sir Richard Burton, miraculously still alive and working as chief taxidermist at the Toronto Natural History Museum.

As in Greyson's previous work, constant references to the Canadian and Toronto contexts privilege a viewer's own local knowledge and slightly estrange non-Canadians. *Zero Patience* also advertises the Toronto media community in which Greyson's work is so embedded, and this does so on the level of in-jokes. In a musical sequence about the dispute over causes of AIDS other than HIV (Greyson's ability to couch complex issues in the form of the musical number transcends the Gilbert and Sullivan-esque), the "bloodstream" is played by members of this community, such as former NAC (National Action Committee) president Judy Rebick, gay activist video-makers Andy Fabo and Michael Balser, and Lisa Steele's daughter Larue Peoples—all floating amid red and white balloons in an indoor swimming pool. While the significance of these people will probably be lost on a non-Canadian, even non-Toronto audience, I think structuring the film around a specific, local community and local knowledges gives it a sort of cognitive density. The point of local authority is not to fetishize local peculiarities but to allow them to multiply until they create a texture of (un)familiarity.

Independent filmmaking in the U.S., is so heavily based in New York (and to a lesser degree San Francisco, Los Angeles and Chicago) that in film and video the experience of these places come to stand for "the city," and life in general. Partly this is a result of simple budget constraints on film- and videomakers (often students) living in these communities. Lacking means to travel or to stage environments, independent filmmakers make do with the city at hand: Central Park stands in for other expanses of trees and grass; tiny, crummy apartments stand in for "home"; and urban buildings festooned with posters and razor wire become the backdrop for all manner of not necessarily urban subjects. Thus New York (and to a lesser extent, other big cities) gains a hegemony on representation. Images of this city become naturalized, so that even when a work is not necessarily set in New York, the city's quite idiosyncratic qualities become the common denominator. Films made in New York end up being films about New York. The result, as Greyson points out, is that work that does not share these characteristics looks strange, hard to place, "out of state." The culture in which independents produce also has a particular, well-known cast in New York. Ideas of how artists look, what they eat, what they do for day jobs, etc., are natural-







ized in the weird and brutal environment of this town, producing wardrobe anxiety for all us of who work in the area of independent media in North America.

Canadian filmmakers are highly aware that "international" recognition really means making it in New York. As Greyson says, "Everybody's great goal is always to rush down to New York and have a great success there. I think the title of Serge Guilbaut's book says it all, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*. I think it's really accurate on how cultural imperialism exports itself.... New York is brilliant at bringing the players from the periphery and constituting them in the centre, then sending them back out to the periphery."

Lee and Lister, two media artists who have experienced being constituted in the centre, corroborate this view. Interestingly, both their experiences reflect the value of being part of a more established media scene. Independent filmmaking in the U.S. has a longer history of involvement in the struggle to establish itself, to create institutional and media advocates, and to break into distribution. According to Lee, "If I hadn't gone to the States at all, that would have been a real handicap, I wouldn't have been part of as wide a circle. Being in the States [she really means New York] gave me exposure to work: in Canada (Toronto) you can see curated work at *Images*, etc., but there's more opportunity to see new work in New York..."

Lister, who is Canadian, has worked and taught in the U.S. for seventeen years. She tells how she left Vancouver for New York in 1975 in search of a community. "It was bad enough for men in Toronto," she says, "it was that much worse for women on the West Coast. At that time I didn't see that there was a very positive interest or support for the kind of work I was doing; feminist political work was not considered art, and the independent film scene was so minimal you didn't get heard. When the Reel Feelings collective showed *So Where's My Prince Already?*, nobody else was interested in considering it as a work of art or part of a dialogue with a community of artists." At the same time, the collective's film was selected for the third International Festival of Films by Women. The first of these New York-based festivals had stimulated the formation of the Vancouver feminist collective in 1973, and generally it seemed that the kind of work Lister was doing was much more part of a community in New York. "Lots of people in New York accepted that the words feminism and art could be said in the same sentence; there was a community dialogue that was attractive to me." Lister ended up moving to the States and using the experience she'd gained editing *Criteria* in Vancouver to revamp *The Independent*, the newsletter of the Association of Independent Video and Filmmakers. Because she was working illegally however, her name never appeared on the masthead.

The difference between Lister's and Lee's experiences (ten years apart) attests to the fact that a feminist film community, as well as other sorts of groups, are now easier to find in Canada. The Canadian brain drain to the States has abated somewhat since the rise of artist-run centres. But Lister's experience of the difference between Vancouver and New York in the '70s exemplifies how the ambivalence between Canadian and U.S. filmmaking is as much about cities as about national difference. The battle of representation between Canadian and U.S. films (a battle probably only perceived as such from the Canadian side)

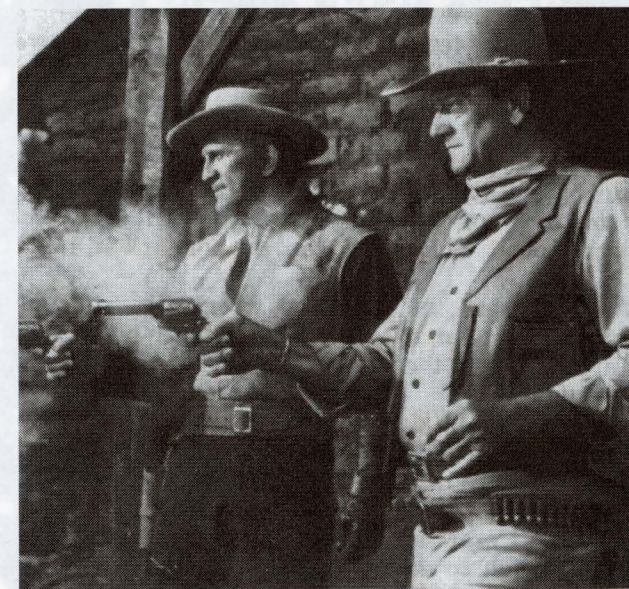
is really more a battle between Toronto/Montreal and New York. Although Toronto is the loathed as the highly funded, brain-draining centre of cultural production with in English-speaking Canada, it is those qualities that give Toronto filmmaking a wedge in the image culture generated around New York. One hegemonic urban centre's images cannot be supplanted by those of a small town, rural area or mid-sized city, but another hegemonic urban centre has a fighting chance.

The fact that Lister was an "illegal alien" underscores the fact of American protectionism that ultimately blocks Canadians' sense of dual identity. Canadians feel we share American cultural identity, but if we try to move on it by working or living in the U.S., we learn that it's not transferable. Insofar as Canada fits into the American imaginary at all, the dynamic is quite different. To try to tease out that difference, let me indulge in one more dual citizen anecdote, which is funny because two events hinge on the same spoken word. An American friend of mine in Rochester knew me for about a year before I came out to her as a Canadian. She exclaimed, "I knew you were too funky to be just American!" About a year later, a Canadian acquaintance who also lives in Rochester found out I was Canadian too. She protested, "But you're too funky to be Canadian!"

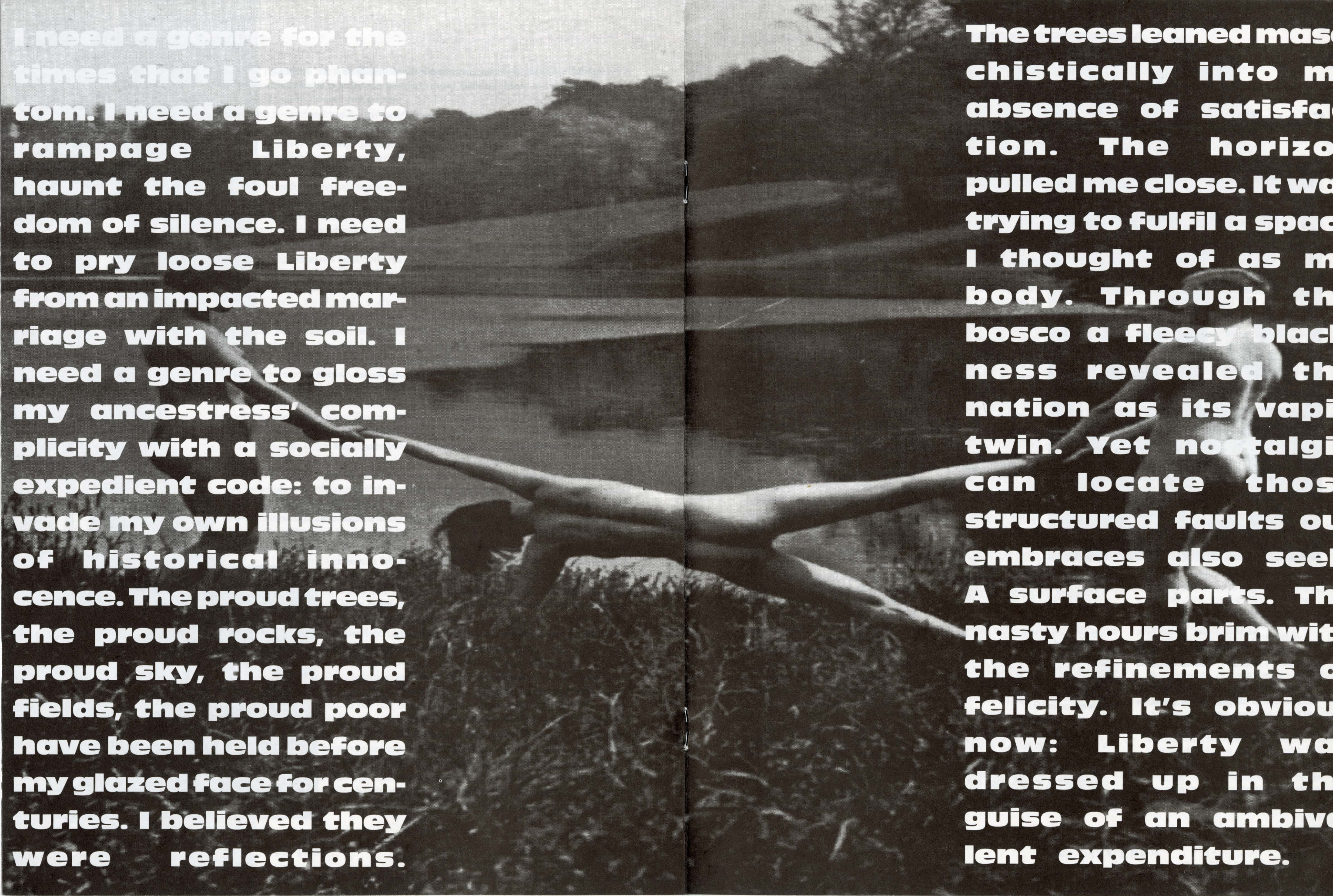
While my friend's observations may not have proved beyond the shadow of a doubt that I am "funky," they do provoke speculation on how this elusive quality is perceived as part of national identity by Americans and Canadians. My American friend had a notion of American identity as something firmly held together from on high that didn't have room for such qualities as funkiness, which she perceived as nonconformist. My Canadian friend thought funkiness denoted a strong will, a quality that is part of the pedagogy of American identity. The moral, I suppose, is that there is no symmetry between two nations when one affirms its identity in a constant reenactment of national pedagogy, while the other constantly reworks its national definition at the micro-level; but if people think you are funky you can get by anywhere.

Michael Dorland argues that the discussion matters deeply because "now, more than ever before, it devolves upon the Canadian cultural project (as manifested by the Canadian artistic and intellectual imagination) to bear the entire burden of not only reviving, but enlarging what is left of the sense of Canadian difference." It will have become obvious that this is not my project here: I have been more interested to use the notion of Canadianness to reveal American not-sameness—the non-identity of "America" with its own narrative. Ultimately, the concern of this article has been not to defend a national identity but to suggest that the U.S. hegemony on national representation is a fragile construction, which Canadian cultural production is in a privileged position of being able to unbalance. Canadian culture need not, and probably should not, have this project as its primary goal. But the very ingredient that expresses Canadian diffidence, the performative quality of Canadian culture, catalyzes on contact the slow disintegration of the U.S. national narrative.

Laura U. Marks is a writer and film programmer living in Rochester, N.Y.







**I need a genre for the times that I go phantom. I need a genre to rampage Liberty, haunt the foul freedom of silence. I need to pry loose Liberty from an impacted marriage with the soil. I need a genre to gloss my ancestress' complicity with a socially expedient code: to invade my own illusions of historical innocence. The proud trees, the proud rocks, the proud sky, the proud fields, the proud poor have been held before my glazed face for centuries. I believed they were reflections.**

**The trees leaned masochistically into my absence of satisfaction. The horizon pulled me close. It was trying to fulfil a space I thought of as my body. Through the bosco a fleecy blackness revealed the nation as its vapid twin. Yet nostalgia can locate those structured faults our embraces also seek. A surface parts. The nasty hours brim with the refinements of felicity. It's obvious now: Liberty was dressed up in the guise of an ambivalent expenditure.**



## Telling Relations: Sexuality and the Family



*Second Wife* (detail), Sarinah Haba, mixed media installation, 1993.

**Deanne Achong, Kathleen Dick,  
Sarinah Haba, Anne Jew,  
Sur Mehat, Shani Mootoo,  
Sulih Williams**

Curated by Larissa Lai  
grunt gallery, Vancouver  
June 15 – July 10, 1993

Curating and art practice that disrupts white (patriarchal) occupation is vital. It stakes out deterritorialized land and creates temporary spaces where we can breathe. In these spaces, not being required to camouflage or explain, we can speak our truths, using the direct, intimate language of the borderlands.

It is this safe passage that allowed seven women of colour artists to uncover rich, complex stories equal in their measures of love and pain. Their secrets, their telling, rupture the "mistress narratives" and intervene in the construction of female sexuality and feminist knowledge. The artists' work illuminates critical, unheard perspectives

about family relationships and sexuality.

Dominant liberal white feminism posits the family as the locus of women's oppression. Liberation lies in dismantling the house of the father. Yet for a woman of colour, the family or community group can also exist as a lifeline, a safe harbour in the face of annihilating racism. Finding alternative support systems and communities is not always possible.

Curator Larissa Lai writes in the catalogue essay, "between sexual practice and family belonging, especially in the Diaspora, we keep secrets and stories which can destroy us or save our lives, depending on how, when and whether we choose to tell them." The stakes are high indeed; there can be

much to lose when defying the family or community rules.

Perhaps that is why Shani Mootoo's piece offers such giddy relief and vicarious pleasure. *Last Night I Dreamt That My Mother And My Lover Stood Together In a Line Up At a Corner Store Discussing The Indian Restaurants of Vancouver* offers a utopian scenario of the all-loving and accepting family.

Beautifully framed in gold and matted in rich purple are photographs of the artist and her father. There is an old snapshot of her father holding two children in a photo kiss at a family party. The other two are portraits of Mootoo with her father's features spliced onto hers. Mootoo juxtaposes text from a recent telephone call to her father when she came out to him as a lesbian.

With these transgressive portraits of her "freakish nature," Mootoo takes on the notion of gendered sexuality. She also cuts straight to the heart of patriarchal fear. She rejects her role as dutiful daughter, and challenges her father by taking on his male aspects, including his prerogative to desire women. But miraculously, her disclosure to her father sparks not anger and rejection, but a stream of praise.

"You know Shanes, I've watched you from here for the last years—you're a very honest person and if you try to live a life that isn't true to yourself you'll be very unhappy. I am really proud of you. I am really impressed with you.... I'll stand by you."

Mootoo snatches us back down to earth with a harsh reminder that not even a parent's unconditional love can shield us against violent homophobia.

"But when I stepped out of my apartment into the street I realized no one knew that I was okay by my parents. I could still be bashed to bits by some stranger who doesn't give a damn about what my parents thought."

Sur Mehat's mixed media installation, *The Spectacle Of Things That Are Suspect*, skillfully conveys the fear,

false starts and miscommunications involved when talking with a parent about sex and happiness. This work probes the inadvertent ways in which Mehat and her mother sustain and wound one another.

What is suspect, Mehat writes in her statement, is the spectacle of her femininity. To please her mother, she wears her hair long, dons clingy dresses, black garters and pumps. But despite this self-conscious process of ornamentation, she cannot erase the fact she is lesbian. To complicate matters, Mehat yearns to give her mother a taste of romance by living out the heady thrills of love for both of them.

Against a backdrop of ornate Indian carpets are small round flaps, resembling doors, which conceal text and images. Under one, Mehat wistfully writes, "You have accepted this about me, and I have the gall to ask for more."

A photo of her mother gazes sternly out from behind a centre flap. Im placable, unreadable, she is flanked on either side by hearts—a medical diagram and a red valentine. Where between the clinical drawing and the symbol of romantic love are the flesh and blood possibilities for Mehat, for her mother? Perhaps these hearts also delineate the distance between the actual and idealized relationship Mehat longs to have with her mother. Under another flap, Mehat declares, "I can bear the weight of anything except your disappointment."

A disturbing and sad footnote to this work takes the form of a note tacked up next to the installation. In it, Mehat abjectly apologizes for using her mother's image in the piece. The note states that her mother felt the piece misrepresented and misinterpreted her. Mehat promises "never to use any images of the family or use the family in any way, shape or form as subject matter in my own work from this point onward."

Although Mehat consulted with her mother, she did not show her the piece until it was installed. This chilling rebuke underlines the loaded issues of respect, privacy, autonomy and censorship within family dynamics, particularly between parent and child. What are the



*Blushed White* (detail), Deanne Achong, colour photographs, 1993. Photo: Merle Addison.

boundaries between self-expression and violation or exploitation of family members? It quickly moves beyond an abstract debate of public versus private when white supremacy turns reactions like the mother's into racist constructs of backward, anti-feminist and barbaric cultures.

Sarinah Haba chooses to locate her inquiry outside the birth family. She deftly undercuts both the heterosexual definition of family and the patriarchal institution of marriage in her humorous, playful installation, *Second Wife*.

Floral, Victorian wallpaper, the front parlour, timeworn photos suggest tradition. In twin wedding portraits, a crewcut Haba and her blond female lover take turns posing as bride and groom. They swap their finery of white wedding gown and Sunday suit.

By rendering the conventions of the European, church wedding absurd, Haba delicately traces those other power relations. Who gets the role of second wife? Can this marriage subvert or transcend those entrenched paradigms of domination and subordination played out in the constructed binaries of white/coloured, aggressor/victim, male/female?

Deanne Achong also touches upon these dichotomies in *Blushed White*, her complex and desultory musings about sexuality and family within the context of her mixed-race, Trinidadian heritage. The piece is comprised of three colour photographs, two of which

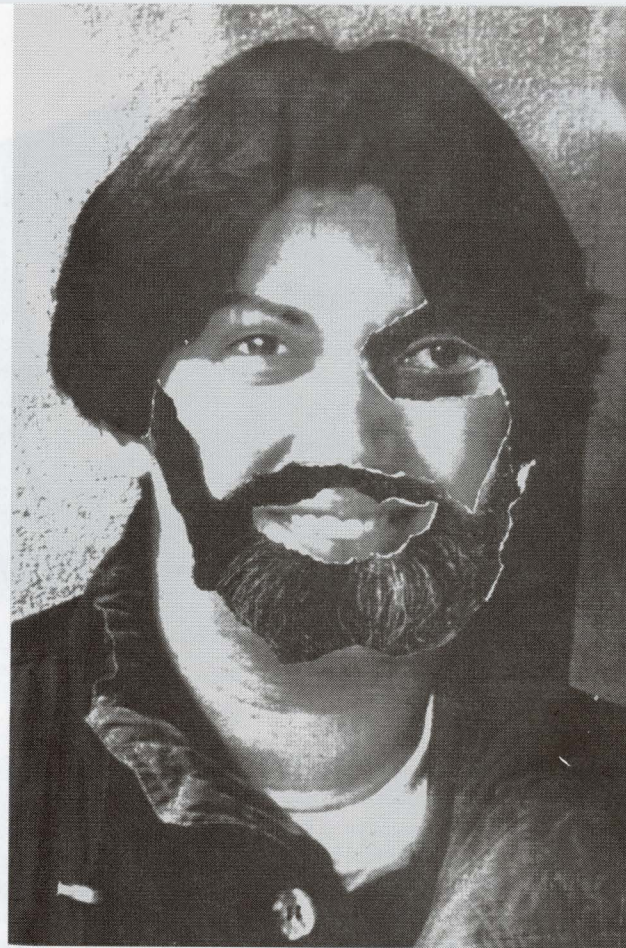
directly confront the experience of alterity.

One scene depicts a brown-skinned woman with her breasts powdered white. Her latex-gloved hand brushes white powder around her left nipple. A sinuous tattoo, the only assertion of sexual agency, snakes across her right breast. The last scene shows the same woman holding a stethoscope, listening to her heartbeat beneath the white powder.

The body beautiful here serves as a map that makes visible the interstices of colonial, patriarchal histories. Achong presents an alienated, medicalized and fragmented physical self. Doubly colonized, the brown female body is then fetishized, exoticized. In her statement, Achong expresses ambivalence about the constant need to negotiate identity: "....I am light, but not white." As a person of mixed race, she must tread that uncertain ground of between-ness, answering to questions of authenticity from both sides.

In *Demeter's Despair*, Kathleen Dick contrasts polarized female sexuality. Her lush painting depicts youth, fecundity, nubile sexuality in ascendance over the discarded, declining, aging female. Demeter, an older black woman, stands in the background swathed in clothing despite the tropical setting. Her eyes are downcast and averted. In front, her daughter defiantly asserts her sexual body. She meets our gaze. Nude, she proffers an abundance of ripe fruit.





Last Night I Dreamt That My Mother and My Lover Stood Together in a Line-Up at a Corner Store Discussing the Indian Restaurants of Vancouver (detail), Shani Mootoo, mixed media installation, 1993. Photo: Merle Addison.

The daughter may be auctioning herself off to the highest bidder. Yet she may also be tantalizing us with a vision of what was or could be. Instead of a commodified female, we can glimpse the autonomous sexual self, the decolonized mind and body. Dick deliberately refers to Greek mythology as a reminder of cultural values that existed prior to the onslaught of imperialism and brutalizing colonial rule. What continuum of women's power existed before patriarchy fixed market values on female bodies and sex? This daughter, who is not named Persephone, can perhaps lead the way out and help undo her mother's despair.

*Dates Places Accomplishments and Numbers* interprets family in the widest sense to mean the African Diaspora. In her mixed-media installation, Sulih Williams bears witness to and mourns the physical and psychic travails that people of African descent have undergone through slavery, rape, and centuries of violence. The work consists of a large canvas square set upon

the floor. At one corner, there is a smashed mud house. From it flows a river of blood evoking the Middle Passage. The blood runs into a cocoon, from which emerges a chrysalis: a tribute to Black people's continued ability to transform and survive. Suspended over the canvas is a ghostly clump of rags of once-useful clothing and fabric. Recalling domestic service, starched white handkerchiefs are neatly glued onto the canvas at regular intervals. Williams holds out hope for meaningful change. She calls for acts of resistance in the continuing struggle for self determination.

Child  
Motha  
Datta  
Brudda  
If this  
Life  
is Change  
Choose  
your own

The odd, random images of Ann Jew's colour photocopies suggest the

memory's aperture — shuttering, locking away details, visual minutiae. The photocopies are divided into four sets. Each has four numbered squares, a reference to the childhood paper guessing game. In each set there is a blacked-out, missing square.

A favorite watch, her teenaged self at the beach with a friend, a man's feet in slippers resting on a vinyl hassock in front of the TV, a Japanese porcelain doll. These images do not resonate with any emotion. They seem flat, consciously banal.

It is Lai's essay that explains the work as an "experience of sexual abuse lying hidden, unsuspected among other everyday memories." One takes another hard look to find those clues. Is it the shot of the headless woman, teetering in her high heels and cheongsam? The window shade pulled down in the bright of day? Or, a child's neat bed topped with stuffed animals?

Jew attempts the difficult challenge of representing repressed knowledge and the survivor's skill at dissembling. But the piece does not entirely work and is frustrating because it backs itself into the riddle of telling by not telling. A conundrum that is not satisfactorily solved by having the answer come from outside the piece.

Within these dense narratives, women of colour artists name and unmask the systems that oppress us. Simultaneously, they establish that these stories are not new. It is only the public telling that is different. There are many more secrets to explore and to take into destabilized spaces so we can continue to claim and create our subjectivities. The artists' investigations of sexual being and family have also yielded what Lai aptly calls "moments of terror and beauty." These moments help us survive. They also strengthen our will to fight so that our daughters in their time will be telling more stories of beauty than terror.

Lorraine Chan is the co-founder of *In Visible Colours Film and Video Society*. She is a cultural worker living in Vancouver.

Thanks to Yasmin Jiواني for her comments.

## Paul Sisetski

Island of the Damned

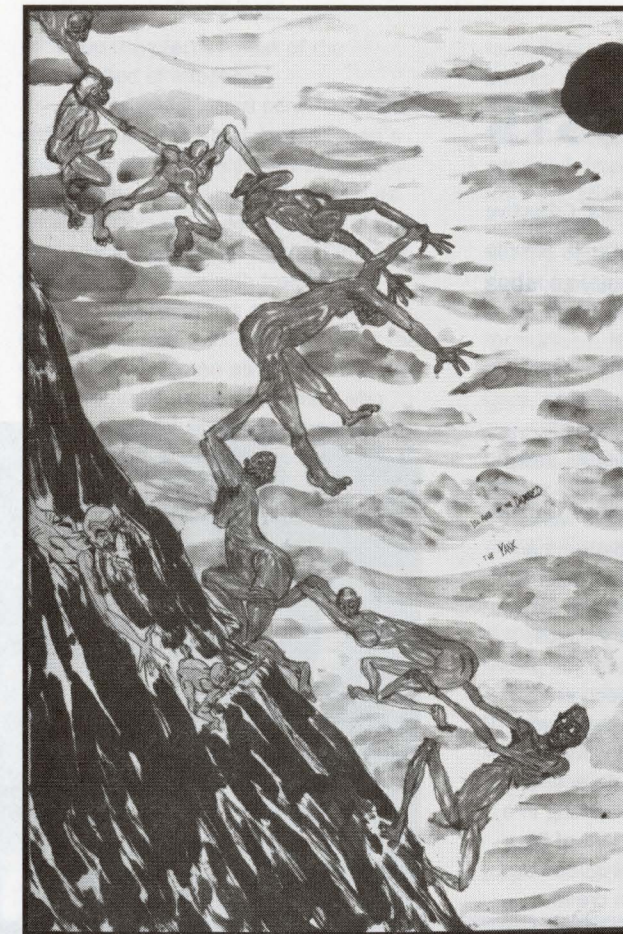
Dunlop Art Gallery, Regina

May 8 – June 13, 1993

Blending more than just superficial references to *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1896) and *Village of the Damned* (1957), Paul Sisetski's remarkable exhibition of 126 ink and tempera drawings also share direct thematic links with these science fiction classics. In *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, for instance, H.G. Wells presents the tale of a demented scientist who tries to transform animals into human beings through genetic engineering, while in *Village of the Damned*, John Wyndham relates the equally chilling story of an English village whose women are impregnated by aliens, producing a hybrid race of pint-sized interstellar invaders. Both novels, with their themes of genetic manipulation and geographic, as well as psychological isolation, find resonance in the work of Sisetski. He is an artist who, even within the most liberal definition of a society bent on political correctness, would be considered an outsider.

Paul Sisetski was born with cerebral palsy, a disability which affects the central nervous system, impairing both the body's motor control and speech. As a child growing up in rural Manitoba and Saskatchewan, he moved often with his family, which contributed to his sense of alienation from mainstream society. In his exhibition *Island of the Damned*, he presents an allegorical narrative incorporating elements of the biblical story of creation and evolutionary theory to articulate his experience as a handicapped<sup>1</sup> person living and working in a "normal" world.

In Sisetski's narrative, a group of winged, immortal interstellar travellers land on an unidentified planet. Once they breathe the planet's atmosphere, they find themselves trapped, and they become susceptible to physiological processes such as aging, disease, hunger and death. As their physical condition deteriorates, they begin accumulating knowledge, and enter into a violent struggle with the planet's original



The Yank, Paul Sisetski, gouache, pen and ink on paper, 1993.

earthbound inhabitants. Ultimately, these formerly omnipotent beings are transformed into pure intellect—a condition Sisetski represents by depicting disembodied heads which are plugged into a communal computer network.

Sisetski incorporates archetypal images of pain, suffering, charity and conflict from those mythologies—Greek, Judeo-Christian, Roman, etc.—which have informed the belief systems in Western society. By subtly twisting these myths and legends, he creates a regressive form of evolution where the less physically able, for example, survive—encouraging viewers to question existing orthodoxies, particularly those which are responsible for prejudicial attitudes toward people with disabilities.

Formally, the drawings, with their bold colours, expressionistic imagery and slogan-like text, recall the sequential narrative structure of underground comic books. Like graffiti, which is another weapon in Sisetski's artistic arse-

nal, underground comic books function as a form of expression for disenfranchised subcultures. For the most part, Sisetski's drawings concentrate on the male body, the physical site of his "difference." By presenting nude, bald, emaciated figures, with missing limbs and contorted facial expressions, he challenges the idealized images of masculinity typical of mass media.

In *Island of the Damned*, Sisetski offers viewers a harrowing insight into the world of disabled people, a world where special rules would seem to apply—be grateful, be celibate, be silent—and the many rights and privileges which most of us take for granted are allocated in a discriminatory manner. But these

drawings go beyond a plea for understanding and compassion. With their aggressive, often brutal images of human cruelty and suffering, they serve as Sisetski's strident demand for the same respect and recognition that is accorded "normal" members of society. At the same time, by structuring his discourse in the form of a science fiction story with biblical overtones, Sisetski avoids being regulated by his disability. Instead, he produces a compelling visual narrative which comments on many aspects of the human condition.

Greg Beatty is a Regina-based freelance writer who writes on the visual arts.

<sup>1</sup> Sisetski refers to himself and others with disabilities as "handicaps." His reclaiming of this term gives it positive political value, comparable to the use of the word "Queer" by lesbians, gays and the transgendered, to designate themselves as a social group.



## GHOSTS

An exhibition by the Blanket Artists' Collective  
 Gallery 76, Toronto  
 June 10 – July 10, 1993

The Blanket Artists' Collective has organized seven exhibitions since its inception six years ago. Although all of the artists in Blanket work or have worked in the administration of artist-run centres, they choose not to administer a space of their own, preferring to show in rented or borrowed gallery space. This resistance to real estate has given them the freedom to approach each exhibition with a minimum of paperwork and a lightheartedness not evident elsewhere in the Toronto arts scene.

A collective of artists working in a variety of media, the members of Blanket organize around an ambiguous and open title which gives them creative freedom while providing a loose curatorial direction. "Ghosts" features some of their strongest work to date. The theme was chosen in relation to the site of the exhibition: the Ontario College of Art's Gallery 76 is situated in two old Victorian houses, and is rumoured to be haunted by the ghost of a young child.

Working with the notion of ghosts as the loose conceptual framework, a range of works about memory, history, death and remembrance becomes possible. Blanket makes the best use of the space in some time. Instead of working against the small rooms and trying to attain more of the ubiquitous cool, white box feel, the artists have allowed their work to be gently enveloped by the six intimate parlours and hallways.

John Atkinson's *Ouija Board* is a floor installation consisting of various pieces of found wood, which together make the shape of a stained-glass window.

Marilyn Nazar's *Awakenings* are groupings of small framed black and white photographs of various female



*L'Esprit Blessé* (detail), Anne-Marie Bénéteau, Mixed Media, 24" x 6", 1993.

body parts draped with sheer white fabric. A hand-painted screen features three photos of the model (the artist herself), wrapped in the sheer fabric and bound and trussed with ribbons. These bondage images break the mesmerizing soft-core porn feeling of the other photos.

Brian Piitz's *Hungry Ghosts* features three images of skinny, demonic-looking creatures interspersed with photo images of a 1940s spanking clean kitchen and bathroom. In an obscure reference to Japanese mythological ghosts believed to be responsible for the disappearance of waste, the artist makes the scatological relation between the kitchen, the bathroom and the human body's recycling system. Piitz is the only member of the collective

who keeps his own personal work separate from the artwork he makes for Blanket, so in the "Ghosts" exhibition we are denied the exquisite photographs of his own voluptuous nude body.

In a corner of a darkened room is David Renaud's *Of House and Home*: two black and white photos from the family album printed positive, negative and then Xeroxed. In one photo, kids on a suburban porch meet their reverse, or "ghost" image in the corner. In the other, a boy and his grandfather are ghostly reminders of family and the patriarchy.

In the same room Michael Balser's video projection, *The Passed*, is reflected into a large framed glass that leans against the wall and is inscribed with

the words "The Treatment." A spooky B-movie image of a man reaching towards and into a glowing television set was made more eerie by the sound of children playing in a nearby park, coincidental noise that I mistook for Balser's sound track.

Viewed from afar, Anne-Marie Bénéteau's beautiful installation, *L'Esprit Blessé*, forms a pattern of undulating waves — dozens of hand-stitched birch bark tubes, like corks floating on a dark sea. From inside each little tube, a cut-out drawing of a bird's head pokes out. The warm, fleshy colour of birch bark springs out from the background of slate grey walls while cradling the birds' heads. Each bird depicted here is already a ghost; an extinct species that can't be saved by Bénéteau's protective, gentle gestures. This is an especially poignant work by an artist who has consistently worked with bird imagery and the issue of our disappearing flora and fauna. A giant "piecework," Bénéteau's installation is dedicated to women's invisible labour, and to all the women who have lost their jobs in the garment industry due to free trade and global restructuring.

Installed in a darkened middle parlour, enveloped by blood-red walls, is Catherine Heard's untitled installation. A diaphanous white silk banner embroidered with human hair stretches from floor to ceiling, facing a gilt-framed mass of lustrous black hair under glass. Etched with a quote from an 1833 medical text, the words: "Men will never feel like women, nor women like men," float above the spooky mass of cut or "dead" hair underneath.

The dark stitches of embroidered hair on the silk panel trace an illustration from a 1754 French medical book of the instruments required and incision location for performing a caesarean section birth. The carefully drawn clamps and scalpels, neatly rolled bandages and towels, and the incision on the curves of the woman's soft abdomen instill in the viewer a sense of logic, confidence and tidy order. Yet when this operation was performed 250 years before anaesthetics were discovered, less than five per cent of these women survived. Since doctors sewed up the skin afterwards but neglected to

stitch up the uterus, most of the women died of infection.

In this work, Heard continues her examination of the history of women's health, and the female body as viewed by the male medical establishment as an aberration and a deformity. In choosing to embroider these medical images, the artist connects with traditional women's domestic art at the time the original text was published. By using the shorn hair of women as her thread, she gently reminds us of the women who died (and continue to die) from the abuses of a system that denies them the right to make autonomous decisions about their bodies.

This work calls to mind works by other Canadian women artists working with embroidery and human hair such as Colette Whiten, Mindy Yan Miller and Michelle Gay.

In *Non-Returnable*, Gwen MacGregor creates a site-specific installation in response to her situation as an artist working in Canada and London, Eng-

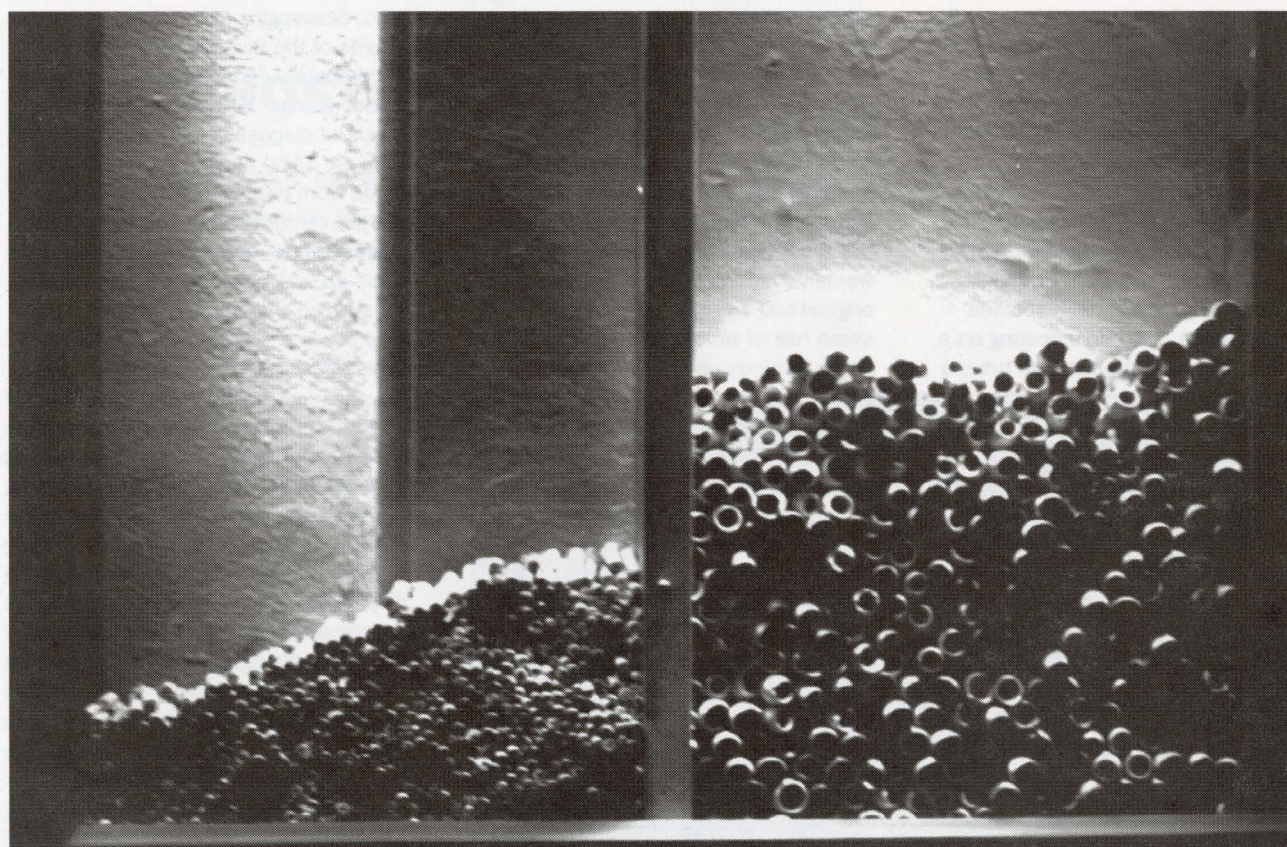
land. Scavenging in the mud on the shores of the River Thames is an old and popular London pastime known as "mud larking." MacGregor found thousands of disposable clay smoking pipes from ca. 1580 to 1850, thrown overboard from barges and boats throughout the centuries. By "excavating" the surface of the gallery wall, the artist reveals an earlier, rough and uneven plaster surface. Hundreds of various sized pipe bowls and stems are displayed here, encased between Plexiglas and the gallery wall. The pipes are beautiful objects, both for the uniformity of their shape and their dun muddy colour — they seem like fossils or ghosts of the artist's European background and culture.

On the opposite wall, facing the display case, is a colour photo of dozens of the pipes assembled on a table. The photo is straight-up documentation, akin to that found in any museum's archives. Beside this is a foam-core mounted text much like the infor-

Untitled, Catherine Heard, silk embroidered with human hair, 1993.







Non-returnable (detail), Gwen MacGregor, installation using clay pipes from the River Thames, London, dating 1720-1850.

mative "signage" from a museum or gallery. But this is a take-off on the standard museological approach. Instead of a text presenting "facts" on trading between English and First Nations people, MacGregor reprints here a first-person account of the Chief of the Ojibwa on Mackinac Island speaking to Alexander Henry, an English trader in 1761. The Chief reprimands the trader for involving the Ojibwa in recent wars between the English and French, and for taking from his people without giving anything back. This Native notion of reciprocity was wrongly interpreted as "Indian giving" by Europeans, but in reality it reflects a balance of giving and receiving.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, the chief offers the trader a pipe to smoke, "as a token of our friendship."

The Native pipe is of course sacred, and the tobacco plant was taken from the Native people in the Americas for commercial consumption in Europe. In this evocative installation, MacGregor presents us with the cultural ghosts of

her European heritage, which haunt her. She exposes the detritus of a colonial, consumer culture, in sharp contrast to the ceremony of sharing a sacred pipe as an act of friendship toward a stranger.

Two artists from outside the collective were asked to write in the show's beautifully designed little catalogue. Andy Fabo's insightful essay gives us a brief history of Blanket in the context of the many other artists' collectives of Toronto — a total of twenty-one both past and present, by Fabo's count. "Ghosts" is completed with a short fictional work by Janette Platana, who examines the stranglehold the deceased have on the living. Platana rejects the clichéd notion of woe and listless haunting, as she reveals the tug of a dead lover in the beloved's heart; the force that pulls the dead back into reality with every memory they evoke in the living.

The artists in Blanket have been making and showing work for ten years,

and yet have gone virtually unrecognized for too long. With "Ghosts," they emerge from the sidelines as a voice to be reckoned with.

Jennifer Rudder is a writer and Director of YYZ Artists' Outlet. Her story "Summer of Love" will be published in the anthology *Frictions II*, to be released by Second Story Press in Fall 1993.

<sup>1</sup> Gloria Steinem, *Revolution From Within: A Book of Self-Esteem*, Little, Brown & Company (Canada) Limited, 1993, p. 97.

## Black is Back!

Toronto Festival of Festivals  
September 9 - 18, 1993



Richard Chevolleau and Tracy Shreve as Skill Blackstock and Cherry O'Baby in *A Variation on the Key 2 Life*, Stephen Williams (dir.), film, 1993.

### Homegrown

While Toronto's Festival of Festivals doesn't have a spotlight on Black and African cinema, the number of films and the calibre of African and diasporic African films featured at this year's festival was by far one of the best the festival has offered.

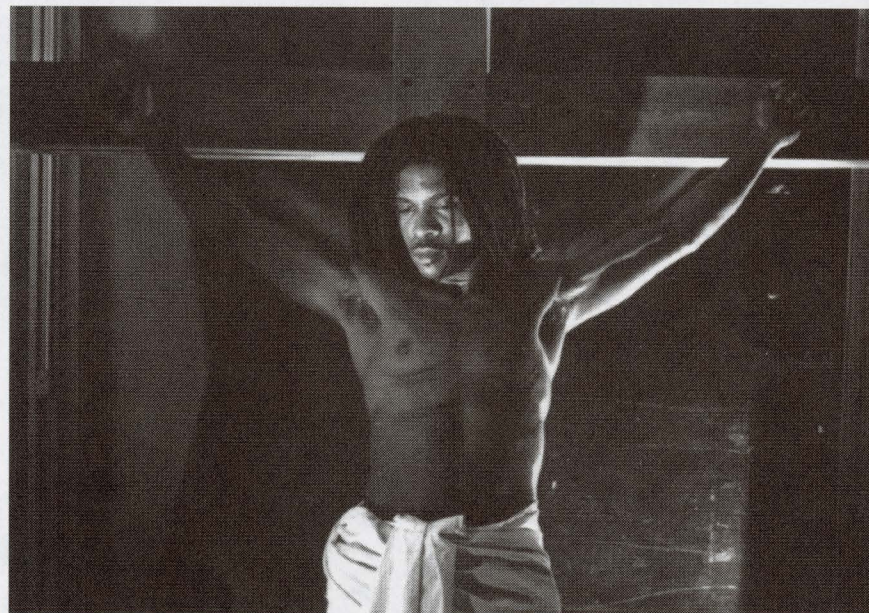
Starting with homegrown films, Black graduates of the Canadian Film Centre's nine month programme, Clement Virgo and Stephen Williams, both made impressive debuts at the Festival. Virgo is becoming known for, shall we say, unique film titles, starting last year with the release of *A Small Dick Fleshy Ass Thang*, which he wrote and co-directed with former Centre resident Virginia Rankin. This year's Festival entry was *Save My Lost Nigga' Soul*.

On the surface, this is a classic story about roommates, but the focus is on three Black guys in a house trying to survive. Two of them are brothers modelled after biblical brothers Cain and Abel. Cain, in this case, is Neville (played by Richard Chevolleau) who is hooked on drugs, and Abel is Matthew (played by Dayo Ade), a holier-than-thou fitness fanatic with faults (he sleeps with his brother's white girlfriend). We are introduced to the household by "unknown comic" Julian who is played to perfection by Montreal-based actor Dean Marshall. It is Julian's rapid-fire performance which pulls you into the story as the tragic drama unfolds. Clement Virgo has made this a highly stylized film, utilizing Harald Bachman's

stunning cinematography and getting outstanding ensemble performances from Ade, Chevolleau and Marshall. The film represents the decay of many families, particularly Black families, when drugs become part of the picture.

Stephen Williams' *A Variation on the Key 2 Life* deals with my favourite obsession: Black male and female relationships and the conflicts created when one partner's career takes precedence over the relationship. Skill Blackstock is in love with Cherry O'Baby, or is it his sax? What is intriguing about Williams' film is the "he said, she said" aspect. Let's take sex. He says, "Cherry was 'wild' in bed." She says, "Skills shit got tired." But this film is not just about relationships: it's about a Black





Still from *Save My Lost Nigga' Soul*, Clement Virgo (dir.), film, 1993.



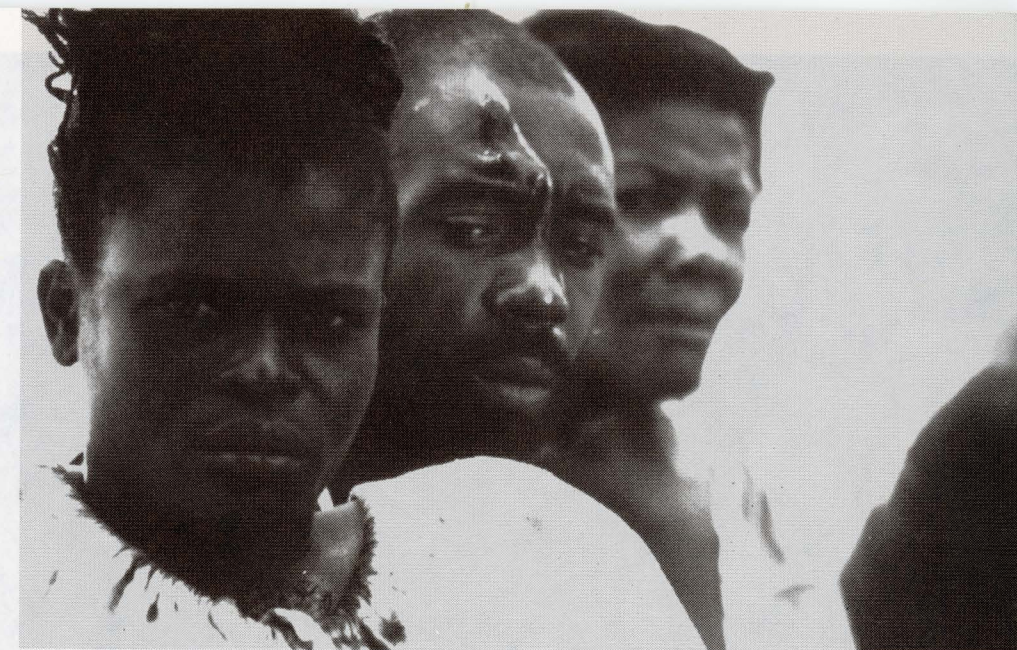
Still from *Them That's Not*, Christene Browne, film, 1993. Photo: Rafy.

man who doesn't want to be part of the "system"; a man who would rather play on the streets for change if the cops would let him. It is also about a woman's wish for the better things in life; a woman who doesn't always want to struggle to pay the rent every month. You might say: "here we go again, yet another Black male director's portrayal of a Black woman wanting nothing from her man but his money." But although Cherry chooses to leave Skill and his selfish ways, it's not an easy decision because she truly loves him, and unbeknownst to him, she's pregnant with his child. Richard Chevolleau shines in this piece as does newcomer Tracy Shreve as Cherry O'Baby. Virgo and Williams shared the Gold Plaque award at the recent Chicago International Film Festival. And Virgo's *Save My Lost Nigga' Soul* won the National Film Board's John Spotton Award for best Canadian short film at the Festival of Festivals. Williams and Virgo are currently pursuing feature film projects which will be eagerly awaited after their impressive short film debuts.

Still homegrown, but in the documentary and experimental genres, are Christene Browne's *Them That's Not*, Nadine Rowe's *The Noise* and Lillian Allen and Giovanni Sampogna's *Blakk Wi Blak...k...k*. Christene Browne was definitely the most qualified filmmaker to direct the National Film Board's fourth film in its "Feminization of Poverty" series. At a relatively young age she has built up a body of documentary films including *From Nevis To...*, *No Choice*, *Brothers in Music*, and the video *Jodie Drake: Blues in My Bread* for the CBC's *Adrienne Clarkson Presents*. She also spent her formative years growing up in Toronto's Regent Park, Canada's oldest and largest housing project. *Them That's Not* is her most ambitious film to date. Not only did she return to her old neighbourhood to interview women trying to bring up their families on welfare, she also travelled across Canada from Yarmouth, Nova Scotia, and Montreal, Quebec to Vancouver, British Columbia collecting interviews. This film could have simply been a sad story. Indeed, there are moments of sadness such as when we see a Native woman in B.C. preparing a hot-

dog dinner on a hot plate in a small one room apartment, or a Guatemalan woman in Toronto who breaks down in tears when she is faced with the prospect of meeting welfare officials without the translator from her local legal aid clinic. *Them That's Not* is also an analysis and strong indictment of the welfare system. One woman down east compares the Canadian welfare system with pimping, calling social service watchdogs "pecker detectors" i.e., if a woman on welfare, in Nova Scotia, is caught living with a man, her benefits are terminated. The film also examines middle class stereotypes of women on welfare such as, "how can a single mother on welfare have a TV and a VCR?" Through the experience of one young woman whose teacher made her feel that she wouldn't achieve like her upper and middle class classmates, the film explores issues of poverty and the "shame" of poverty. We are also party to a political action in Montreal taken by the "Coalition against Bill 37." Coalition members occupied an office at the Ministry of Community Services. The steady hand-held camera of cinematographer Joan Hutton is particularly striking in this sequence. *Them That's Not* ends with the slogan on a banner "end legislated poverty," and with the analysis that the most oppressed people on welfare — Blacks, Native peoples, women, the disabled, and single mothers — have to be the ones who change the system. Browne's film is a testimony to those people.

*The Noise*, by Ottawa-based Nadine Rowe made its world premiere at last year's Festival of Festivals. It was back again this year as part of Perspective Canada's "10 X 10" series, a celebration of the first decade of the Perspective Canada programme at the Festival. Ten programmers were invited to select films that they feel have been either overlooked, under-screened, or were worthy of re-evaluation. *The Noise* was one of eight films programmed by Geeta Sondhi. Rowe's film is a hip and quick presentation of how Blacks are stereotyped in advertising, from an ironic take on the beauty myth to the car-stealing-gold-chain-wearing gang member reminiscent of the neighbourhood "games" scene in Keenen Ivory Wayans



Still from *Sankofa*, Haile Gerima (dir.), film, 1993. Courtesy of the filmmaker.

satire *I'm Gonna Get You Sucka* in which different gangs are given prizes for how quickly they can strip a car.

Finally *Blakk Wi Blak...k...k*, is dub poet Lillian Allen's directorial debut. Co-directed with Giovanni Sampogna, the film focuses on the "riddims" and words of internationally acclaimed Jamaican dub poet Mutabaruka. This is an impressive first film for Allen. Shot in black and white, her camera becomes a roving reporter as we move smoothly between the snow and ice of a Canadian winter and the warmth and sunshine of Jamaica. The film, titled after one of Mutabaruka's songs, is a political journey as we see and hear him talk about Rastafari, a culture and religion which, he admits, oppresses women, but adds, "then again don't most religions?" The issues covered in his songs include chemical and biological warfare where he targets the Mickey D's and Burger Kings of North America. His song *Famine Injection* shares a similar theme, and is the backdrop for scenes of a Toronto sugar plant juxtaposed with a plow in a sugar cane field. Although the film would have been strengthened by some additional street footage for the segments in which we don't see Mutabaruka in concert or being interviewed *Blakk Wi Blak...k...k*, holds its own as a tribute to a revolutionary artist.

### From the Continent

Idrissa Ouedraogo, the Burkinabe filmmaker whose works *Yaaba*, and *Tilai* have been Festival of Festival favourites in the past, both with programmers and audiences, was back again this year with his new feature *Samba Traore*. This film was featured earlier this year at FESPACO, the Pan African Film and Television Festival in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso. The local and international audiences loved it, but some Black international academics had other things to say. As was the case with *Yaaba* and *Tilai*, *Samba Traore* is set in a village somewhere in Burkina Faso. This is a story which many people from Canada's Black West Indian immigrant population can certainly relate to. When an immigrant returns "home" the locals expect to see signs of prosperity. Ouedraogo's Samba returns to his village flaunting his wealth. However, he attained this wealth through a robbery, which comes back to haunt him. As always, Ouedraogo's actors — some professional, some not — are realistic. His cinematography is beautiful, capturing the essence of village life in Burkina Faso. Then why do some critics challenge his films? There is a feeling that Ouedraogo should move away from the village, which they argue is neo-colonialist in its representation of stereotypical images of African life. They also believe that he should deal with present day political issues and stop making films for the European market, through which he acquires some of the funding to make his fea-





Still from *Samba Traore*, Idrissa Ouedraogo (dir.), film, France/Burkina Faso, 1992.

tures. When I asked him about this in an interview in 1991, Ouedraogo's response was to describe himself as an artist. He believed that those who criticized the focus of his stories should set up a government body to make social issue documentaries. He has resisted this pressure from critics for some five years now—only time will tell if his focus will change.

Tanzanian filmmaker Flora M'mbugu-Schelling is a very opinionated individual whose high standards she sets for herself and other African filmmakers can seem very imposing. But her my-way-or-the-highway attitude is not evident in *These Hands*. This often understated documentary is about African women who spend long days, sometimes with their children, in a rock quarry, crushing stone. The film is mesmerizing. The only dialogue is that of women singing while they work, the only sound is that of the crushing of rock and of their children crying. The camera work on *These Hands* is as steady as a rock. As a viewer, you almost feel the pain when one of the women hits her hand and it starts to bleed on the rocks. *These Hands* is an excellent documentary that should be seen by a wider audience and more particularly by film studies students and instructors. I'm waiting for someone to write a comparative analysis of M'mbugu-

Schelling's *These Hands* and Trinh T. Minh Ha's *Reassemblage*. The similarities, such as the lack of narration in both films as well as their subject matter—African women—are striking. However, the responses of the various audiences to each film, particularly Black women's responses, are totally different. *These Hands* elicits empathy for its silent subjects while *Reassemblage* elicits a quieter rage for the apparent silencing of the African women.

On the surface, *Sankofa* by U.S.-based Ethiopian filmmaker Haile Gerima and *Seven Songs for Malcolm X* by Black Audio Film Collective member John Akomfrah have nothing in common. Gerima's film is an epic dramatic feature shot in Ghana and Jamaica about an African American woman who is transported to the slavery days of her past. "Sankofa" is an Akan word that translates "to return to the past in order to go forward." In fact, the Sankofa bird is depicted with its head looking backward. Akomfrah's *Seven Songs for Malcolm X* is a documentary with highly stylized dramatic reconstructions which tells the story of this revolutionary African American through the thoughts and memories of his brother Wilfred Little, his widow Betty Shabazz, filmmaker Spike Lee, cultural critic Greg Tate, community activists Hassan El-Sayeed and Yuri Kochiyama, writer Thulani Davis

and a host of others who were a part of Malcolm X's life. What these outstanding pieces share is the fact that they are both international coproductions or cooperations by Black filmmakers with other Black and African artists. *Sankofa* utilized Burkinabe, Jamaican, Ghanaian and African American crews and features an international cast that includes dub poet Mutabaruka (the subject of Lillian Allen's *Blakk Wi Blak...k...k*). *Seven Songs*, produced by Black Audio Film Collective, used Arthur Jafa, the African American director of photography of Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust*, for cinematography. While the extent of the international cooperation involved in *Seven Songs* is less evident than in Gerima's *Sankofa* (due to the relative economies of producing a documentary and a substantial feature-length screenplay like *Sankofa*). The international collaboration between Black artists in the Diaspora and African filmmakers is encouraging. The Pan-African nature of a film and television festival like FESPACO will result in more of these coproductions, strengthening Black filmmaking in the Diaspora and on the continent.

#### Kudos

Honourable mention should go to Ngozi Onwurah's *Monday's Girls*, a documentary set in Nigeria, and her experimental narrative *Flight of the Swan*, both impressive pieces from the London-based director. Tracey Moffatt presented *Be-devil*, a challenging first feature film. And actor Forest Whitaker made his feature film directorial debut with the outstanding *Strapped*, winning the FIPRESCI International Film Critics' Award for best film by a first-time director. With the strong showing of high calibre African and diasporic African films at this year's Festival of Festivals, let's hope that Black will continue to be "in" in the years to come at this festival.

*Glance W. Lawrence is an independent Black film and videomaker living in Toronto. In February 1993, she attended the thirteenth edition of FESPACO, the Pan African Film and Television Festival in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso.*

CLIVE ROBERTSON

## Performance

### Kaiashits/Boneman

Innuinuit Theatre Company, L'Ascension, Quebec  
A copresentation of Boréal Multimédia (La Macaza)  
and Festival de théâtre des Amériques (Montreal).  
June 2, 1993.

"What if they don't want to become good little Indian Christians?"  
— Ranger Guzzwell

### Youth Cruci-fiction at L'Ascension

The wide sandy banks of the Rouge River in the Upper Laurentians, two- and a half hours north of Montreal, provide a natural stage where the oxbow twists form amphitheatres. The Rouge flows through and alongside townships historically overseen and named by the famous Catholic priest, Curé Labelle: L'Annonciation (population 2340), L'Ascension (population 680) and La Macaza (population 800).

This stretch of glacial valley is now home for the "art and nature" collective, Boréal Multimédia. Last year Boréal hosted the Tokyo Bhutto group, Bodhisattva, in a collaboration with Canadian sculptor Mark Prent. Boréal is known for its perennial collaborative art research and production, which takes place as a continuation of the work done at Manitou College, the groundbreaking national Native arts educational facility in La Macaza that was forced to close down in 1974.

This year Montreal's annual Festival de théâtre des Amériques invited Boréal co-founder, sculptor Domingo Cisneros, to help organize a non-urban Native event as a component of the festival. Cisneros was skimming a newspaper and found a report of a young people's theatre group, Labrador's Innuinuit

Theatre Company, and its play, *Kaiashits/Boneman*, which was recognized with an award during the 1992 Newfoundland Drama Festival. Cisneros ditched his original *Talking Stick* proposal for the more immediate opportunity to add support to the theatre company's built-in mandate—cultural resistance as a counter to Davis Inlet's much reported circumstances of pre-adult deaths and injuries through neglect, suicide and substance abuse.

The young Innu actors from Davis Inlet and their Inuit counterparts from Nain, located 100 km further north on the Labrador coast, would be flown in for their first visit to Quebec to perform in a programme that would include the Micmac Free Spirit Drummers from Cape Breton, Abenaki artist/composer/filmmaker Alanis Obomsawin as MC, and Algonquin Elder William Commander from Manawaki to conduct a sweet grass blessing.

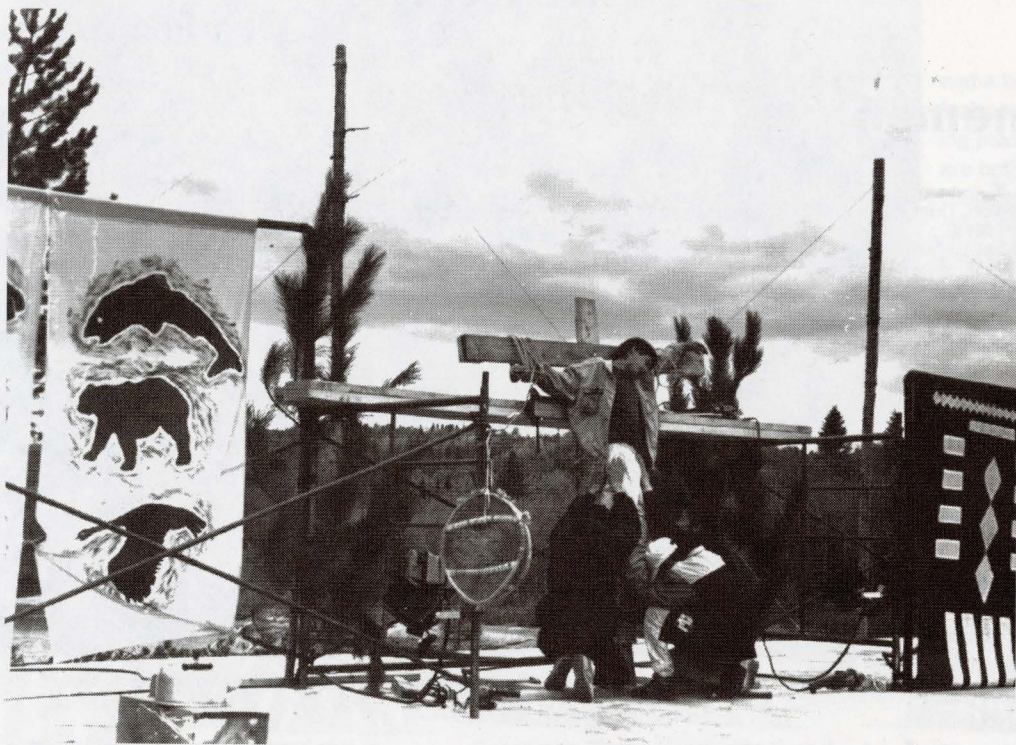
The young theatre company—the actors' ages range from fourteen to nineteen—was born in the middle of a snowstorm when two teachers, Louis Byrne from Davis Inlet and Bill Wheaton from Nain, hatched this creative cultural collaboration. Both white teachers have

lived and worked in their respective communities for over a decade.

For *Boneman*, a play set in the 1920s, the students researched the history of the early contact between the Mushuau Innu and the white authorities, with assistance from the collective memory of their Elders. *Boneman*'s colonization narrative is familiar in outline if not in detail. The play's relevance is easily exportable from the east coast of Labrador to the Upper Laurentians of Quebec, for it was here that Curé Labelle displaced the Algonquin and Iroquois from their lands to make room for white mineral and timber prospectors and settlers.

The characters of the play include an Innu family: Tommy, the Boneman; Lucy, his wife; their son, Steve and Tommy's friend, Antoine Simon. The white authority figures are Father Joe, a Catholic priest who has spent time among the Innu, learning to speak their language and winning their provisional confidence; the local Hudson's Bay manager, Mr. Parsons; Nurse Liève, who works along the Labrador coast with the International Grenfell Missions; and the militant Ranger Guzzwell, a Newfoundlander who wants to kick butt and who correctly assumes that Innu





Performance of *Kaiashits* at l'Ascension, Quebec, June 2, 1993. Photo: Piché 1993.

traditional life and the real interests of the Church, the trading company and the medical charity are on a collision course.

Two converging plots are played out and physically separated on the stage. The rear stage area is filled on the Innu side with painted animal, bird and fish spirit backdrops and on the European side with increasingly more ornate symbols and regalia of Christianity.

The Innu are preparing caribou bones for *Mukashan*, crushing the bones and extracting the edible marrow. They are—in between Tommy's premonitory dreams—anticipating the return of Father Joe and his European friends, and the priest's baptism of their baby.

Having requested assistance from the Department of Indian Relief, Father Joe's expedition is setting out to construct (if they can enlist the Innu for labour) a church, a school, a nursing station and a law enforcement building. Through the flashback device of recited correspondence from various associates of the European professionals, we learn that the introduction of whooping cough is wiping out the local inhabitants, and that the local trading repre-

sentatives are applying the carrotless stick: ordering the Innu to hunt for Caribou in locations where there aren't any, and punishing them when they come back empty-handed by denying them access to substitute food rations. Father Joe (played with the large voice of Pauline Angnatok), after encouraging his accomplices to: "...pray for the Chief to be wise and throw away all the evils of the ceremonies of the drum," decides that *his* God's will must be done and that the shaman/Boneman must die.

Between downpours and blackflies, the Boréal crew constructed a spectacular stage and audience area in a riverside forest clearing. The trail from the temporary parking lot to the staging area was illuminated by eight-foot high and ground level spirit torches, and the perimeter of the area by eight-foot high log beacon "teepees."

The Innuinuit Theatre Company, used to skidooing between Nain and Davis Inlet for rehearsals, had less than two days to reacquaint themselves and rehearse. The off-site gathering place was l'Ascension's Bar Salon Meilleur where the company relaxed, shot pool and ate.

The event itself was an amazingly complex and layered cultural exchange, grounded in this piece of popular theatre and enhanced by the complete *mise en scène* provided by the organizers—a Native meeting place with rural Quebec hospitality and support.

The costumed actors all spoke in English, with the portrayed Innu family delivering their lines first in English and then in Innu. The Elder, William Commander addressed the audience in Cree. Alanis Obomsawin MC'd in French and English. She first welcomed the gathering and then, when discussing the content of the play, showed her distress about the social effects of past and present injustices. Following the show, as part of her long-held supportive

role, Alanis teased, praised and prompted the young actors to share their thoughts and impressions with the audience. Post-performance, there was invitational dancing with the Free Spirit Drummers and complimentary refreshments of Iroquois corn soup and Arctic tea.

The Free Spirit Drummers similarly expressed the spiritual, the secular and the social. They opened the show with the formal introductory Honour Song. Later, they explained for the audience the stories and function of the Gathering Song, the Round Dance, the Eagle Song, and the Agojiwa sung at socials. At the end of the evening they became the house drumming band, playing dances for a responsive audience who called for more.

*Boneman* opens with a short contemporary scene, as two young boys come across a caribou leg in the middle of the highway. One says to the other: "It must have fallen off a garbage truck. I can't believe they used to eat this shit!"

The play's interscene music is mostly crisp slide-guitar country rock that is initially disorienting when interspersed with the stylized dialogue. As

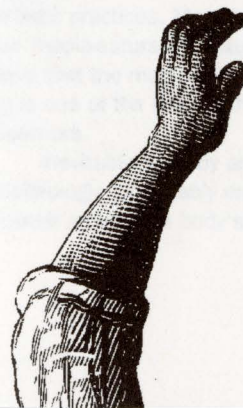
the Europeans turn on the Innu, a development which is depicted with simultaneous interactions between all the actors, we hear a familiar Innu song from Kashtin.

As the play reaches its dramatic and ironic climax, the Boneman's experiences parallel the last days of Christ. He asks: "Won't anyone stay awake with me?" in a prediction of his own and his people's fate. In a following scene, the European congregation is addressed by Father Joe: "The Boneman must die. What shall we do with him?" They reply: "Crucify him! Crucify him!" Finally, we see the Boneman's family weeping at the foot of a cross, accompanied by the scream of an overdriven guitar and flashing lights.

All this took place in the township named l'Ascension; Curé Labelle must, at the very least, have been struck with a heavenly heartburn.

(Thanks to Domingo Cisneros, Wanda Campbell and Jean Fabb for supplementary information and Boréal for access to the video documentation of the event.)

*Clive Robertson is currently writing a book on community, media and theory debates that support or contest changes in art practice and authorship to be jointly published this winter by Tellem Press and Artex.*



## Returning the Gaze

Edited by Himani Bannerji

Toronto: Sister Vision Press, 1993

It figures that it would take Sister Vision Press (Black Women and Women of Colour Press) to publish *Returning the Gaze* and begin to fill the vacuum of books on racism, feminism and politics written by women of colour in Canada. This is not to say that there are not individual essays on each of these areas that have been published in journals and magazines or delivered at conferences. But there are few compilations of critical essays/articles, oral histories or in-depth studies that are non-fiction and in book form, at least not in Canada.

This is precisely the motivating force behind *Returning the Gaze: Essays on Racism, Feminism and Politics* edited by Himani Bannerji, a South Asian writer and professor at York University. Bannerji writes:

"The invisibility of 'visible minority women' in Canada is such that, until recently, readers and scholars residing elsewhere could perhaps justifiably conclude from published evidence that: a) Canada does not or did not have a significant non-white population; or b) if they at all existed, women (or men) among them were/incapable of writing or not significant enough to be written about; and c) understanding Canadian society is possible without any consideration of colonialism and (sexist) racism."

Bannerji makes clear that *Returning the Gaze* is only a "beginning book," an urgent attempt to publish critical writings by non-white women. Driven by this ur-

gency, Bannerji has pulled together an impressive listing of women writers (including Dionne Brand, Makeda Silvera, Lee Maracle, Sherene Razack, and Roxana Ng) and divided the book into three central areas in which these writings are presented.

The first section, "Beginning from Ourselves," has the writers reflecting on themselves and their culture. This section not only deals with identity but also the effects of colonialism in shaping the notions/images we have of ourselves. The second section, "Mirrored in the World" offers readers a discussion on the images white people have of non-white people. This is not a question of striking down stereotypes, but rather looking at the historical social/cultural/political fabric of Canada and seeing how it contributes to creating images of oppression and ruling. The third section, "Talking about Structures," examines the social organizations, structures and institutions which are formed or developed to seemingly respond to the needs of non-white people, when in fact they are shown to be "at work in organizing exploitation and ruling the bases of race, sex and class." For example, in "Visible Minority Women A Creation of the Canadian State," Brand and Linda Carty examine the formation of the National Organization of Immigrant Visible Minority Women (NOIVMW), an organization formed by the government representing two important poles: its immigrant and racial connections and its women's organizational contacts, both of which had potential to make the state uncomfortable:



The state's efforts were meant to create a containing women's network, while simultaneously diffusing the tensions against itself which were building up in each individual women's group, but because of its inability to deal with the different issues such as racism, sexism, better wages and better jobs, its organizing created new divisions.

Brand and Carty cite the exclusion of white Latin women from a conference sponsored by NOIVMW because "neither their accent nor their documented experiences of discrimination in Canadian society made them 'visible minority,' because they are white."

Besides having an acronym no one can pronounce, the writers say NOIVMW undermines the work, strategies and models already devised by the different immigrant and racial minority communities. Groups such as Women Working with Immigrant Women and the Cross Cultural Communication Centre had already organized and focused on issues of racism and sexism long before the federal government seriously considered the needs of either group as important.

### Reads Like a Roller Coaster

It is true that, as Bannerji says, each of these essays can stand alone, but the absence of consistency in writing styles and reading levels makes the book so jagged from essay to essay, it reads like a roller coaster.

This anthology brings together speeches, essays, poetry, dialogue and critical writing (some of which have been previously published) to form thoughtful, insightful and expressive reflections on racism, feminism and politics. My favourite, "A Jewel in the Frown: Striking Accord Between India/n Feminists," features text and dialogue between Amita Handa and Anita Sheth. This is an excellent discussion around identity issues between two Indian women each defining her Indian-ness out of a different set of circumstances: Amita, born in England and brought up in Canada, has visited India many times and has stayed there for up to one year

on two occasions; and Anita, born and raised in India came to Canada over 10 years ago to pursue a master's degree.

The discussion around who is more "Indian" than the other, how one can preserve ancestral culture in another country and what the factors are that change and affect one's behaviour in Canada, force both women to ask at some point, "will the real Indian please stand up?" This is by far one of the strongest and liveliest essays in *Returning the Gaze* mostly because the topic is so engaging but also because the language is accessible.

This is not always the case. There are parts of this book that are practically incomprehensible. Not because they don't make some sense, but because they are so full of academic jargon you need a forklift to remove all the unnecessary words to get to the point. For example, in the introduction Bannerji writes that the essays:

rest on a politicized notion of representation rather than the liberal notion of visibility which structures the discursive practices of multiculturalism and ethnic and race relations. Beginning from the specificities of our different subjectivities, shaped by different forms of colonial and neo-colonial imperialist histories and political economies, both the content and the arrangement of the anthology provide initial grounds for critical thought unindentured to this or that theory.

Say what!?

Reading passages like this make me wonder who Bannerji sees as the audience here. No one can argue that a publication like *Returning the Gaze* is overdue and more should join it on bookshelves, but if the purpose is to appeal solely to academics, and have only a small segment read through these writings, then the overall goal, I believe, is truly lost. This is not night-table reading, but there is certainly a wider group of women (and men) outside of academia who would benefit significantly from these writings.

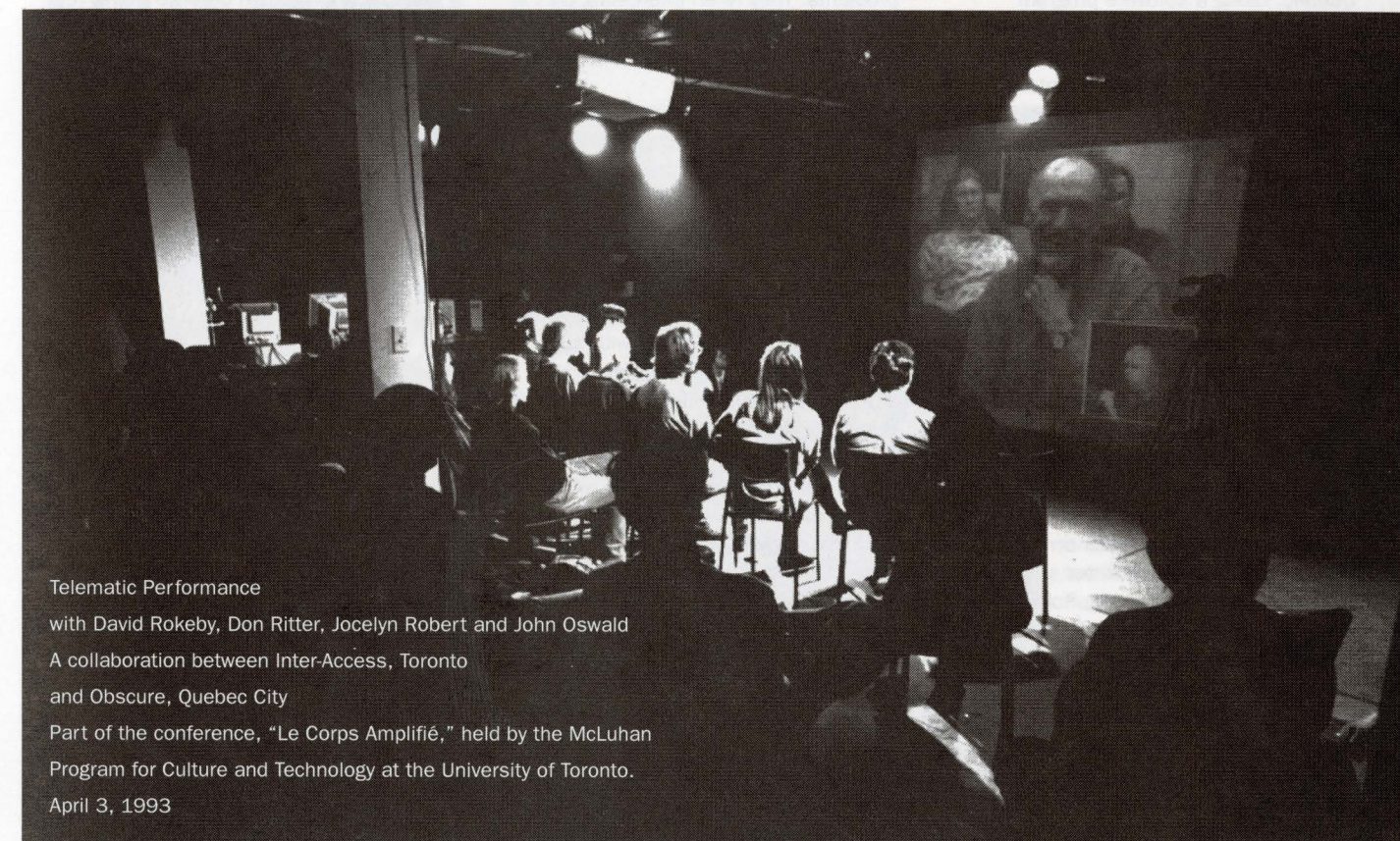
Overall, *Returning the Gaze* is too good to pass. Readers should take heart. If you can get past the introduc-

tion and an essay running on academic overload here and there, you will find this book to be a worthwhile and necessary read.

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## Telematic Performance Loops Toronto and Quebec



Telematic Performance

with David Rokeby, Don Ritter, Jocelyn Robert and John Oswald

A collaboration between Inter-Access, Toronto

and Obscure, Quebec City

Part of the conference, "Le Corps Amplifié," held by the McLuhan Program for Culture and Technology at the University of Toronto.

April 3, 1993

Photo documentation for the *Telematic Performance* at Obscure, Quebec City. Photo: François Bergeron.

At the time, Marshall McLuhan's view that technology extends parts of the human body to places beyond its physical limits seemed both insightful and clairvoyant. Yet today, the degree to which the body has actually been and will continue to be extended by technologies is unquantifiable: technologies have allowed our limbs, organs, senses and cells to infiltrate multiple aspects of society. Consequently, it is not surprising that the uses of technology and technological media have eroded traditional artistic practices. More specifically, in our media-saturated culture, many believe that the manipulation of technology is one of the few worthy artistic endeavours.

Inevitably, work by artists using technologies inevitably entails a discourse around the body's ability to

achieve the super physical, such as travelling great distances instantaneously, extending body parts, bringing together distant groups of people or being able, seemingly, to compress time.

On April 3, as part of "Le Corps Amplifié" (The Amplified Body), a four-day series focusing on the interactions of the human body with technology, an interactive "telematic" performance took place between Toronto and Quebec. Artist-run centre Obscure (Quebec City) collaborated with the University of Toronto's McLuhan Program for Culture and Technology and Inter-Access, a local artist computer facility, to present an interactive audio- and video-conference. Four artists, David Rokeby, Don Ritter, John Oswald and Jocelyn Robert created an electronic loop between the

two cities that consisted of live music and "live" video imagery.

The sparks that started the inter-city loop were the saxophone sounds of John Oswald in Quebec City, although the loop could theoretically have started at several points. Computer-audio artist Jocelyn Robert sampled John Oswald's saxophone and David Rokeby's music as it was fed back from Toronto. These sounds were the input for Don Ritter's software program, Orpheus, designed in 1988 to explore the possibilities of sound-image correspondence by using the characteristics of sound to alter video imagery. The imagery generated by Oswald's and Robert's sounds were televised to the Quebec City audience and were also simultaneously sent "live" through specialized telephone



lines to the McLuhan Centre audience in Toronto.

There, David Rokeby was awaiting the reception of the imagery sent from Quebec. Using a software program called IntAct, which analyzes the light differences between video frames, the video imagery was translated into music. The "virtual symphony" created by IntAct was comprised mainly of percussion instruments, a flute and a Middle Eastern reed instrument. In addition, Rokeby occasionally altered the audio feed from Quebec by feeding it through an audio processor linked to his computer. This diverse compendium of sounds was simultaneously sent back to Ritter, Robert and Oswald at Obscure in Quebec, thereby completing the inter-city, music-imagery-music loop.

Ritter's spontaneous choice of three possible sound sources served as precursor for the images presented. Wearing earphones to focus on the audio input of each artist, Ritter selected either Oswald's sax playing, Robert's looped electronic music, or Rokeby's image-generated music from Toronto, as the variable for the next animation sequence, bringing the audiences in and out of an array of audiovisual combinations.

The images displayed to the audiences were selected by Ritter from seven video monitors, depicting imagery such as a 1920s boxing match, an organic dancing hourglass figure, Robert playing electronic music, Oswald on sax and shots of the Toronto and Quebec audiences. Other monitors showed superimposed layers of this imagery where, for example, faces from the Toronto audience appeared as ghosts on top of colour-saturated, oscillating lines against a black background. Aiming a video camera at the selected monitor, Ritter chose the visuals that would serve as the input for Rokeby's system in Toronto. As he did so, feedback would occur, resulting in large explosions of colour.

For about fifteen minutes, the two audiences experienced a plethora of musical mixtures and metaphors. However, an abrupt interruption of the performance temporarily deflated the excitement about high-technology when the Quebec video signal was accidental-

ly lost and the Toronto audience waited bewildered until the connection was restored. But David Rokeby was unfazed: "People are interested in the technical problems. They're an interesting part of the experience and it's not inappropriate to have them as part of the performance."

Soon after, a telematic discussion began including some of the other artists participating in "Le Corps Amplifié" (Stelarc, Paul Demarinis, Laetitia Sonani and Lisa Moren). The discussion focused mainly on electronic art, the collapse of space between bodies and the potential collapse of the body itself. The ensuing conversations with audience members, fueled by the virginal use of a video phone by most people, in effect, diffused the impact of the performance, given the thrill of a first-hand video-conferencing experience with their counterparts in Quebec. The crux of the discussion was the "reality" of this technologically-aided instantaneous line-up of two groups, actually 800 km apart.

If there was a degree of awkwardness during this discussion, it was because group-to-group communication "etiquette" has yet to be defined. As Jocelyn Robert said later, "I wondered how our communication would change now that we could see each other. How would it nurture or feed relations? We created a special context for something to happen but nothing happened. It seemed empty." In actuality, the lack of familiarity concerned us into behaving somewhat like children using a telephone for the first time, repeating "hello" over and over and waiting for something amazing to happen. The audiences' behaviour made for interesting observation; responses varied from intimidation, comfort, and utter complacency, to exhibitionism, as typified by a young man who flagellated his tongue for comic relief. The illusionary nature of the media was felt when the systems were shut down and the "real" people on the other end of the network vanished, leaving some with a feeling of electronic withdrawal.

Although this performance was a significant artistic venture in the manipulation of technologies, acceptance of this genre of work within the realm of

"art" is still met by resistance, and has yet to receive significant critical attention. Posited against this lack of reception is the belief that art must encompass technologies in order to better reflect who we are and contemporary culture. As Don Ritter aptly says, "If art is really going to be the *zeitgeist* of the day, you can't work like Picasso, you can't work like Matisse.... The spirit of the day is information, it is technology."

Mary Anne Farah is presently doing a Master's Degree in Art History at Concordia University focusing on the Electronic Arts in Canada.

## Shawna Dempsey Lorri Millan



Shawna Dempsey in *Mary Medusa*, performance by Dempsey and Lorri Millan. Photo: Lorri Millan.

Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan (the duo infamous for *We're Talking Vulva*) spent the summer of 1993 touring their current project *Mary Medusa*, from Vancouver to Halifax. This work, in the tradition of Tanya Mars' 1983-1987 trilogy (*Pure Virtue*, *Pure Sin*, *Pure Nonsense*), explores the relationship between women and power using iconic characters. Mars used Queen Elizabeth I, Mae West, and Alice in Wonderland to speak to issues of sex, death, love, power, and the relationships among girls, men and women, and authority. Each of Mars' characters has a genre of historic power, as does Medusa, the icon around which *Mary Medusa* was created.

*Mary Medusa* examines who has power and how one might get it. In Greek mythology, Medusa was one of three sisters with a head full of snakes in place of hair. Called the gorgons, they were so hideously ugly that men who looked at them turned to stone. Their looks killed, they didn't. As such, the role of the killer and the power which accompanied it, was forced upon Medusa and her sisters.

Dempsey and Millan's use of classical mythology is not new. A previous work, *Mermaid in Love* (not to be confused with Aida McDonald's 1984 performance *Mermaids in Love*) was created out of the dichotomy between the Disney mermaid, enthralled by romance, and the Sirens of ancient

LEVI

## Profile

mythology. Like the girl in McDonald's work, who falls in love with the mermaids, Dempsey and Millan's mermaid is a lesbian. Their "mermaid in love" has the power of the Sirens, but is trapped by fantasies of love like the Disney character.

With *Mermaid in Love* and *Mary Medusa*, subtleties can escape audiences unfamiliar with the underlying myths. For example, both Medusa and the Sirens killed unsuspecting men. Medusa turned those who gazed into her eyes to stone. The Sirens sang so seductively that sailors jumped into the sea, and to their death by drowning. In patriarchal mythology, the Sirens and Medusa were the enemy. However, in Dempsey and Millan's performances, they are the heroines. The power of the original characters is maintained, but they no longer represent evil incarnate

In *Mary Medusa*, the gorgon assumes contemporary roles — a bride, a mother and a business woman. The work explores how, within these roles, women are allowed to express a desire for power. Dempsey and Millan believe that society restricts women to certain roles, and to obeying the concomitant rules these roles imply. *Mary Medusa* is about the impossibility of living with patriarchy's expectations. It explores what happens if, rather than becoming "bad girls" in breaking rules, women become empowered by transgression and use that power to change society.

The impossibility of living within the restrictive boundaries insisted on by patriarchy has long been a topic for feminist performance art. Pam Patterson



and Leena Raudvee, collaborating since 1983 under the name Artifacts, have made works exposing the impact of the external world on women's inner experiences. Joint performances such as *Entrapment*, *Female Laundry*, *Headaches for the Unit*, Patterson's *Remaking* and Raudvee's *Housebound* are examples of a tradition of bringing women's experience into the limelight. *Mary Medusa* continues this initiative, albeit with less subtlety than these earlier works.

Another issue the Medusa myth raises, which is central to this piece, is what defines gender. In the myth, Medusa is decapitated, and much of the performance is focused on whether a woman without a body remains a woman. At one point, the bodiless Medusa says, with some irony, "You know being a woman without a body means I can wear model sizes and they look great, but I still lack finishing details, like hands and feet...I guess you're damned if you do and damned if you don't have a body. Being without a body is the closest I've come to having a perfect figure, but I still feel inadequate."

Like many of Dempsey and Millan's earlier works, *Mary Medusa* is a multimedia piece. The performance is accompanied by two slide shows, a book and a video, *Medusa Raw*. In *Medusa Raw*, Dempsey is joined by Sharon Bajer (*Zak and Speth*; *Jesus Does Laundry Too*) who plays Athena and a bride. Athena appears as Medusa's companion through the millennium, implying continuity when she appears as the bride in the contemporary images. The introduction of the bride, who passionately shares a kiss with Medusa, was inserted to challenge heterosexual assumptions, rather than as a conscious lesbian statement. The addition of another performer encourages Dempsey and Millan to move beyond their usual monologues, and explore the dynamics between characters. The slides and video accompaniments add a not unwelcome element of distance to an otherwise intense performance.

*Mary Medusa* culminates with a scene in which Medusa, the business woman, crushes a cake between her thighs, while clad only in a silk shirt and



*Bellies*, Lorri Millan and Shawna Dempsey, B + W photograph. Produced during the Banff Centre for the Arts Residency "Instability of the Feminist Subject," October - December, 1992.

a pair of control-top pantyhose. It is a provocative, and for some, disturbing scene. Dempsey says it symbolizes "an irrational, out of control act on the part of the woman that is also sexual and sexually self-satisfying. And there's no room for a man in the picture. I'm looking after myself with my cake, thank you. And, it's great." The scene, which is actually recycled from an earlier Dempsey work, *Fat* (1985), challenges the viewer's concepts of food and sexuality, breaking taboos about food, appetite, sex and propriety.

Early Dempsey works, including *Breast* (1983), *Fat* (1985), *Pornography* (1985), and *We're Talking Vulva* (1986), had the grace of simplicity, each dealing with single issues and concerns. In the more recent work, perhaps as a result of her partnership with Lori Millan, the issues are more complex, the truths many layered and the humour strong. The duo are now working on a number of projects, two of which figure in a series of "unlikely" dresses. In the fall of 1992, they built an arborite house dress for which they are currently creating a performance. They are also in the process of building a free-standing stained glass dress, which Dempsey will step into to perform. Like Dempsey's *Saran Wrap dress* (*Pornography*, 1985) and the restrictive costume of Mars' Queen Elizabeth I, these "unlikely" dresses allow further exploration of the impact of fashion on physical as well as psychological freedom.

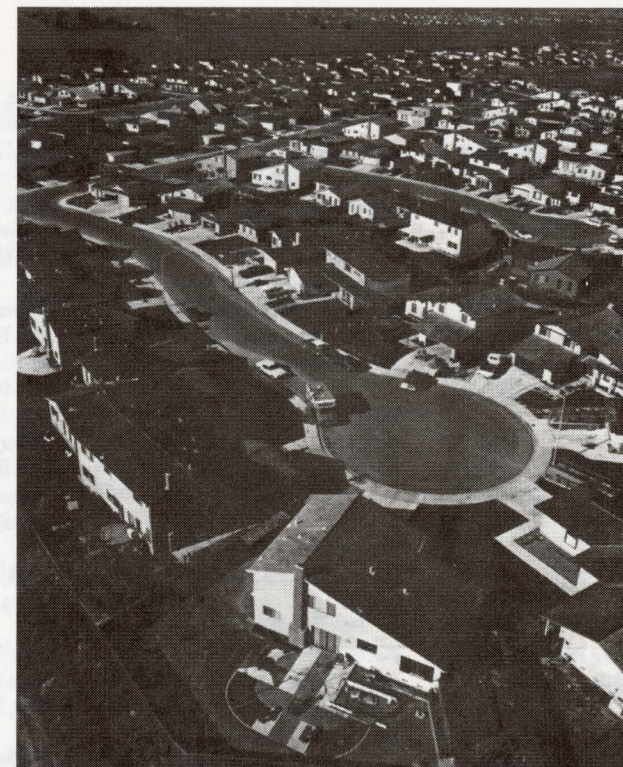
Their latest project, still incipient, is a series of site-specific performances about the lesbian body. Although most of their work is about aspects of the female body, and women's relationships to their own bodies, they wanted to look "specifically at the lesbian body, because as lesbians we are defined by sexual activities with other women or the activities of our bodies, at the same time we are victimized or oppressed [with regard] to our bodies — queer bashing is a real threat — so we want to explore that duality: the societal pressures for us as lesbians, and the pleasure we get."

Reminiscent of Paulette Phillips' *Find the Performer* (1983), a four-part series which involved posters and performances at busy city intersections, Dempsey and Millan's new work will also be enacted in non-traditional spaces over a period of eight to twelve months. Each performance will be different, and accompanied in this case by a postcard, rather than a poster.

Constantly creating new works, while building on the established traditions of performance art, Shauna Dempsey and Lorri Millan are successfully creating a body of work which investigates the concerns of women and lesbians with the complexity they deserve.

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Compiled by Lesa Hanna

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Paul Wong: *Chinaman's Peak — Walking the Mountain*, (Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver), review, no.4 (43-44)

Lewis, Dennis  
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